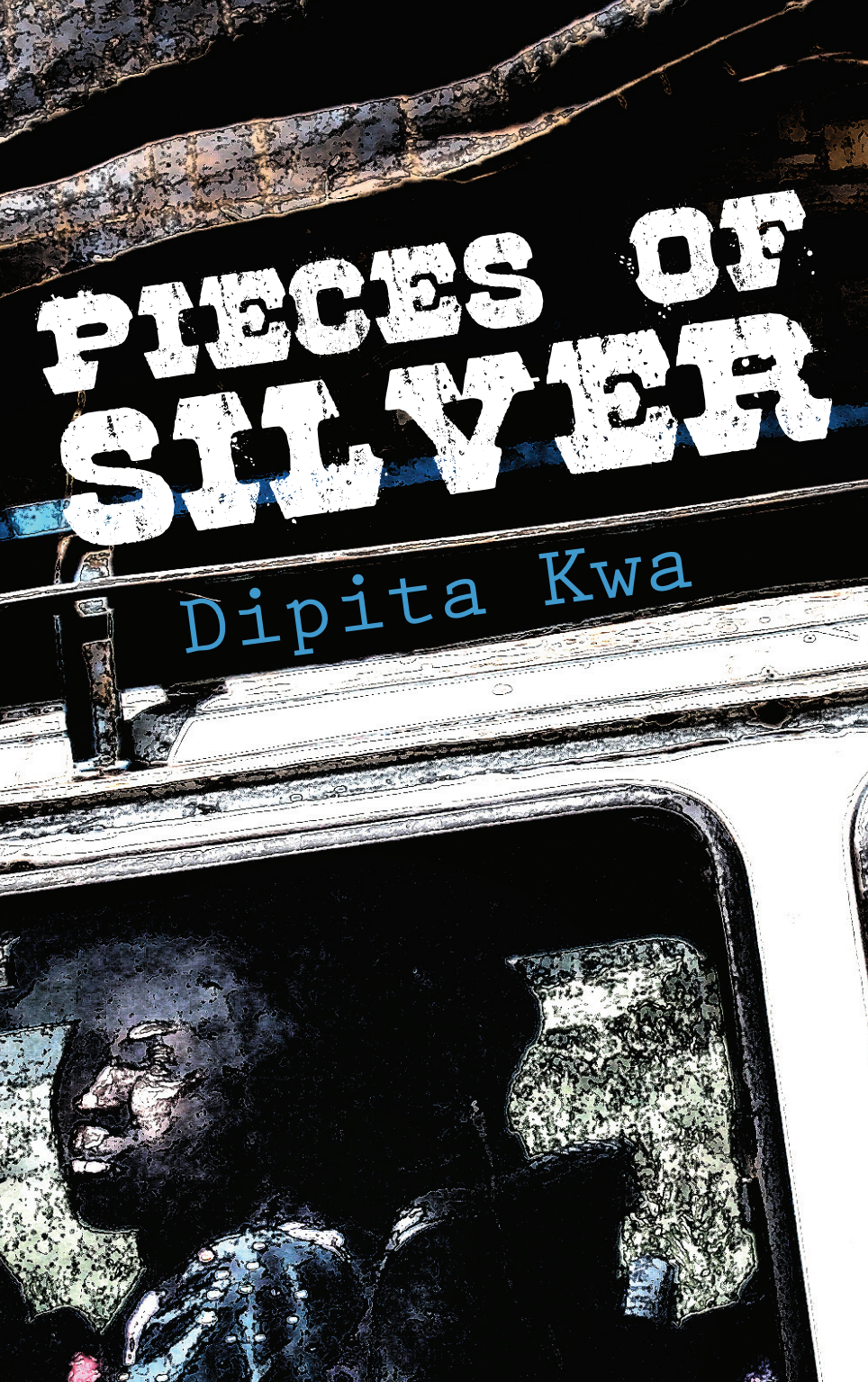
PIECES OF SILVER
Dipita Kwa

VISIT…

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To the memory of KWA Elvis Felix and Mbella Sonne Dipoko

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It is at last a bright Saturday morning after a long, wet week. On a day like this, with no children at home to worry about, I ought to stay in bed until nine, wake up to cook my favourite meal, sit on the sofa with both legs placed on the table beside a bowl of popcorn, watching *Gardeners* on my big TV screen. Instead I woke up at six, jumped in and out of the bathroom, ate a sandwich my driver bought for me from the bakery across the street and let myself be driven to my office. Here I am, sitting in the office at 8:45 to listen to people tell the stories of events that had recently led to bloodshed, grief, anger and sore feelings of revenge.

In moments like these I feel thankful to Jerome for validating my suggestion to come over to my new post alone for a few months before bringing the kids along later. By the time Lea and Bitu come over to live with me permanently and begin the second term in their new school, I must have found my footing and fallen to a more or less routine administrative work.

Most workers feel that their jobs are the most strenuous. Mine is sonar. My elder sister is amongst the many people to tell me that in my job, I am like a cockroach trapped in a henhouse, running around in circles, looking for a heap of sawdust to hide its head. I tell her that she is wrong. I never hide my head from any beak.

'Of course you won't admit it,' Charlotte Mukudi had declared on one of those occasions when I had tried to convince her that I was up to the challenges of my job. 'I accept that you are smart. But that is not enough for a D.O Lady. You lack that coarse skin that pricks. You are too smooth to mingle with the fleece of this life with proboscis hardened by avarice.'

'Shasha, are you saying this because I am a woman?' I had asked her, expecting her to deny it.

'Partly yes, and partly no,' she said. 'You are too courageous, I must admit. Too dangerously courageous. Not good for a woman. An administrator or not.'

'Do you believe in miracles?' I had asked her.

'Of course, I do.' She looked apprehensive. 'But it depends on who is performing the magic.'

I nodded. I wouldn't agree less after our childhood together.

'Do you remember the story of the blind man who shouted out to Jesus saying "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"?' I asked.

'Mark ten forty seven,' Charlotte replied. 'We acted it one Harvest Thanksgiving with Pondo playing the part of Bartimaeus. You don't expect me to forget that. What with that?'

'Have you tried to imagine what would have become of Bartimaeus if he had heeded to the reprimands of the men around him and shut his mouth as he was ordered to do?' I asked.

She shook her head, doubt flooding her face.

'He would have died a blind man,' I told her.

Charlotte wasn't very sure she understood my drift. 'How does this relate to what you are doing?' she asked.

'We all are Bartimaeus,' I told her. 'We all have our part of shouting to do if we want to claim our healing. My breakthrough might have been triggered by that broken spoke in your famous wheel of fortune. But just as blind Bartimaeus, knowing the limitations blindness imposed on him, refused to succumb to the unproductive dictates of the majority, I too will shout my case and give others the opportunity to shout theirs too. It is the least we can do.'

'If everyone has to shout who then will pay heed?'Charlotte asked.

I didn't answer directly. I instead put forth the question, 'Do you know that amongst the men who demanded that the blind man shuts his mouth, there were lepers, victims of

sexual violence, barren women, epileptic patients, children abandoned to the streets, men in dire need of redemption?'

She didn't respond. And I didn't go on to push my view any further than I had done. I let her be. It isn't my strong point to hold an argument of this kind with my sister in a hairdressing saloon.

Until today, Charlotte is convinced that a great defect in one of the spokes in the wheel of destiny accounted for my admission into the National School of Administration and Magistracy ENAM. It is clear in her mind that I will hardly ever progress up the ladder of Public Administration because of my unorthodox approach in the execution of my functions.

I have often heard that people complain behind my back that I have transformed my office into some sort of playground for 'every kind of person'. It is said that I don't keep the required distance from the general mass and in doing this I compromise the enforcement of the respect of protocol. Disturbing most, they say, is the fact that I am a woman and like every woman in a strategic position like mine, I need to always appear stern and unsmiling, rude and exhibit the dispensation to trade blows in order to instil fear and respect.

Violence isn't my strong point either. I believe in a rare kind of justice. Not the type taken hostage and hidden in the seal of the law. I believe in giving a chance for everyone to see and feel their guilt and then heave their cross on to their shoulder and take on the journey to penitence, knowing full well why they merit it.

Whatever anyone might say or think about me, I am proud to be the Divisional Officer of Njopongo Sub-Division. I was born into a modest farming family in Njok, a small village in this Sub-Division thirty four years ago. If one is to split the theoretical low-income group into high, middle and low sub-groups or categories, mine can be classified under modest high-low income families. My father was a

food and cash crops farmer on weekdays and a barber in the evenings and weekends and the eve of feast days. My mother assisted him in the farm from January when clearing began, to the planting months of March to June. From July to December she retailed raw food crops in Njok market during the day and on a counter in front of our house in the evening and on weekends.

We went to church regularly on Sundays like most families did. My father fasted during Lent and forced us to attend doctrine classes and Station of the Cross after school. Before we went to bed, if Mama wasn't very tired, she gathered us all in the living room for bible lessons and evening prayers in addition to what Pa Catechist had drummed into our young ears some hours earlier.

Although many things have changed from my days as a young girl, the ground still feels familiar to my feet. I count myself lucky to have been posted here after my first mission in the South, barely twenty two months after my graduation from the National School of Administration and Magistracy, to serve the people who raised me.

I am a mother of two beautiful children and wife to a husband who loves and respects me for what I am. The love I have experienced all my life has taught me that a people is a people regardless of their roots and other sociological inclinations.

I happen to be drawn in to Socrates' Dialectic. As a young girl, I have seen a version of it at work in resolving disputes, through long and noisy family meetings, when members of our extensive family comprising of seven uncles, five aunts and several nieces and nephews, crowded in my father's house. I have seen it at work in our crowded village square and in the market with everyone screaming their grievances, joys and aspirations above the heat of the sun and cloud of dust and cold raindrops and mud.

I grew up in a community of storytellers. Like my mother, I like to tell my stories and listen to others tell theirs. No

matter how twisting and boring their stories may appear to be, I strive not to yield to the sleepiness of boredom, but steel myself to hear them out. As a mother, this quality serves me well with my son and daughter. As an administrator, I rely much on understanding personal motivation.

In order to best understand motive, my mother told me, you have to listen attentively to its voice, and critically examine its face, savour every pitch and note and the twists of flesh and muscles – like what they teach those guys in police academy.

It is for the sake of understanding motive in order to determine the root cause of the tension secretly building in the hearts of some people in my area of jurisdiction that I asked that Zacheus Esingi and Sadi Mbenga be released from police custody and brought to my office this morning.

Sadi's father, Mbenga Matindi, came to my office all the way from Njok on Thursday morning to request my intervention in this 'very embarrassing case' which, 'only goes to confirm the generally-held view that Njopongo is fast closing in to a kleptocracy'. How the word kleptocracy pricked the tongue! If Charlotte had heard him say this and listened to the answer I gave, she would have emphasized her view that I am the piteous rain-beaten puppy hoping to find some warmth in biting off flakes from one or more of the bitter and hateful rocky letters of that word KLEPTOCRACY – a word so distantly foreign, yet which has slowly and slyly been hewed over time into the very foundation stones of our homes while everyone slept and snored with a pillow pressed against their eyes and ears. She would have asked me how many of the eleven letters I am convinced that I will be able to chew off the rock of collective resistance to change with my tiny teeth – teeth not even fit to chew the tendons of rejection and mockery.

'Don't waste your time, Rosi-Daniela Kouoh,' she would have said, calling me by all my names as my father often did

when he was tired after a long day of labour. 'Only God can free us,' she would have added.

I have been tempted to agree with her a few times. Even my colleagues have told me in no mild words that I cannot change the state of things. I am alone, an inconsequential pure drop of rain falling into a stream profoundly muddied by greed and the blind attachment to for power.

'The whole place is rotten,' my assistant, Adamou, told me in an inept surgeon's tone of absolute desperation when I just arrived Njopongo two months earlier to take up duties. 'We are all beyond salvation. In this town important functions like court verdicts are decided in beer parlours after several crates of beer and sachets of wine have been emptied. They meet in the weekends. The State Counsel, the commissioners, the commandants, the lawyers . . . all of them. Even the D.Os. They meet to drink and in their drunkenness they decide which case files deserve no attention and have to disappear. Which cases shouldn't be heard at all and have to be subjected to perpetual adjournment. They consult to determine where to prod during the coming days in order to get the envelopes that will enable them drink again come next gathering. That is the life here. *Mimbo* followed by betrayal of trust. Madam Kouoh, you just have to close your eyes and flow with the rest, pretending there is nothing wrong,' he had said, frowning into his glass of mineral water as though he wished it contained strong liquor instead.

'There is no salvation,' Adamou had continued in that doomsday tone of voice, his eyes glistening with the embarrassing signs of early tears. 'The clique is so tightly interconnected that the common man has nowhere to run to. You are harassed by a policeman, or a chief, or a taxation officer or a gang of those council bullies and you run to the State Counsel or D.O to complain. They instead call the person harassing you and arrange with the gendarme or police to get you arrested on a Friday and thrown into jail for

the entire weekend. They call it REDA, *Retreat for the Despisers of Authority*. I tell you it is bad!'

I had recognized how bad it was from the shadows of the thoughts chasing each other in the mind behind that frown in Adamou's face. They were wishful thoughts struggling to find solid footholds in the slippery earth of a hopelessly corrupt town. However, in that dark haze of jumbled frustration, my assistant still saw and steadfastly clung to that tiny ray of light, that tiny wish that things could be different one day. That those of us clothe in robes of authority would one day wake up to the consciousness of the heavy burden we were heaping on an already overloaded society. Just like Adamou, I think it is about time we take a quick roundabout turn to amend our method of governance. And this is possible when we look into the eyes of our children and see that river of hope in them and then solemnly decide as one person that enough-is-enough.

I too have been submerged in Adamou's kind of depressing reasoning that there is no way out. There are moments I sit and think that it is useless to waste one's effort hoping to bring restoration to a system that has become rigid with rusts. Then as though waking up from a sleep, I tell myself that I am a woman. In this woman that I am, I am a D.O – an indispensable arm of civil administration. In my honour, I promise that I will do my best!

Back in school, I was taught that when the rule of law is crushed and thrown out of the window, corruption and all other forms of ugly crimes stroll in through the door, soiling the floor with their bloody feet. And this is what I am living at the moment. As a result of greed, misplaced priorities, lawlessness and blind anger, blood has been spilt, several lives have been wasted and there are spirits of vengeance still hovering in the air. Yaoundé has asked a number of questions which I must provide answers to latest Monday. I have a draft report already but I feel that what I have as information isn't

a very objective and comprehensive representation of what truly happened.

From what I see, if I let some people have their way around this case, some people will spend several days or even weeks in police custody without charges. Out of pity, they might be called up a long time after, bullied and threatened to pay enormously for their freedom. Some story shall be made up and filed away. Nobody will ever know what truly happened. And nobody will be able to proactively prevent a similar grave occurrence. For ever, administration will remain handicapped while the administered mourn in a corner.

In order to restore order, balm the bruised hearts and come out with an accurate report for Yaoundé, I have chosen my own method. I have chosen to enlist the help of some of those hands, lucky to still be alive and available, that in one way or the other contributed in bringing about this mad chaos. I want to hear their stories.

This is my mission this bright Saturday morning as I am sitting now in the head of the long chocolate-brown iroko table in the centre of the Conference Room of the divisional office building. Three of my guests are sitting quietly on both sides of the table; Sadi Mbenga and Zacheus Esingi are on my right and Lord Mayor Lobe's beautiful niece Sirri Atam on my left. Adamou is on my right elbow still shuffling papers about like a hen searching for food particles in a mount of debris.

I cough to clear my voice and to bring wandering minds back to the room. It is time to start the inquisition.

'As I told you before, this is supposed to be a forum for frank discussions,' I begin, looking from one set of eyes to another. 'I have ears to listen to people like you. This is not a trial of any kind, just a truth-finding conversation. It is my wish that I shall be able to have the collaboration of everyone in this room. Just think of it as a family meeting. I hope you understand.'

Two heads out of the three nodded. Sadi Mbenga seems to be sitting on a huge rock, feet spread apart, on top of some high mountain in a faraway land contemplating a possible vaporization into inexistence.

'I know some of you are asking yourself where the other actors in that barbaric scene are,' I say, hoping to get Sadi into the room. 'I have had a serious talk with a few people. I can assure you that justice will be done. Now I will like to hear from you Sadi first. You told the police that it all began when the mayor sent his men to bribe you. Am I right?'

Sadi descends slowly back to earth. He stares at me, probably wondering if he heard my question. Then he nods slowly, landing at last.

'Why the bribe? What did they want from you?' I ask casually.

Sadi stares back at me suspiciously and then shrugs. 'The elections,' he mumbles. 'NMORA elections. They wanted me to ensure that their man elected.'

His left eye is black where I heard he was punched by one of the policemen after he was dragged to the police station.

'I see!' I say, hoping that I sound encouraging. 'I want to hear everything from the beginning. For example, apart from the mayor, who are the other people you met with on this election business?'

Sadi draws his chair closer to the table so that he can rest his arms on the hard, smooth surface of the table. I shift my chair backward so that I can lean on the soft backrest and stretch my legs under the table, kicking off my shoes.

I have never been able to happily savour the sour word *procedure*. Yet, when an occasion like this presents itself, I often permit myself to indulge in the luxury of the fascination of watching people spend so much energy putting up appearances of 'following rules'. I see Adamou's cheap blue ballpoint pen poise to take down notes on a new notepad and I wonder if he has enough pages to do so and how far the broken ink in that filament will take him.

Better to watch and listen! I tell myself as Sadi stares at the blades of the old ceiling fan, certainly contemplating where to begin.

1

'One morning, not long from now you will wake up, look at that wall calendar behind your bed and realize that you are four days away from your fifty-eighth birthday and still unmarried and without a child,' Mbenga Matindi Jonathan said as he planted his elbows on the window frame from within the living room and watched Sadi washing clothes on the veranda beyond.

Standing behind the window, Mbenga's bald head rubbed against the top window frame. He was chewing noisily at the thick branch of a hibiscus plant he had harvested in the morning from the hedges outside the rusty zinc gate where Sadi parked his battered bus. Mbenga refused using the spare Colgate toothbrush that Sadi kept in the bathroom for visitors. The hibiscus plant, he argued, was medicinally good for the teeth, especially old teeth like his that had crushed all kinds of bones and fibres.

'For how long will I have to stand the sight of you washing your own clothes? Look at how you peel the skin of your fingers on a Monday morning like this. This is just not tolerable, not with all those spinsters loitering around searching for any man to hide them under his roof. Sadi, I want a wife in this house! Twenty nine is old enough!'

Sadi looked up from his washing at the thin man with a beardless chin and a prominent tuft of moustache that screened his upper lip. It was a momentary glance. He was used to hearing these words that pricked like the pointed edges of sewing needles. And whenever he heard these admonishing words he told himself that Mbenga said them only to make him feel guilty, sad, and ashamed of his status. But the narrow eyes peering at him now said that their owner had been ignored for too long and was determined to be obeyed this time.

In Mbenga's world, a bachelor at twenty nine was a major crisis that required serious attention. He got married to Catherine when he was thirty eight and Catherine was twenty six. They begot Sadi nineteen months into their marriage. Catherine only conceived again when Sadi was eleven – a pregnancy that killed her and the fetus that would have been Sadi's younger sister. Mbenga had a farm to clear with life and Sadi happened to be his only available sharp machete. He was determined to use him whether Sadi liked it or not.

'I will surprise you,' Sadi said in a weak grunt and attempted a chuckle.

'When? For how much longer do I have to wait for that surprise?'

Sadi couldn't tell. He knew promising a surprise was a lame bluff but his mind couldn't weave anything better to say. He was of the opinion that being an only son, especially of a father like Mbenga who adored perfection in whatever one did, was quite a tedious task. Last Easter, after the Holy Mass at the Mission in Njok, Mbenga took him for a walk in the CDC palm plantation. Among the many things Mbenga told him, Sadi retained his father's most precious wish: 'I will like to see that all my failures in this life are corrected in your life, Sadi,' Mbenga had whispered, his hand around Sadi's shoulders.

'You have to dance across where I had fallen and laugh with pride where I had been ashamed to open my mouth and weep. You must succeed in all the places where I failed. You must increase this family. Have as many children as my parents and I couldn't have. This family needs to grow.'

Mbenga wanted a daughter-in-law and grandchildren and he wouldn't be silenced until his wishes were granted. It was a father's customary right, as he often proclaimed, to carry his grandson on his knees and recite stories of his youth to him. And it was Sadi's duty to rest his father's mind. The trouble was that Sadi felt that he wasn't ready to start yet. This annoyed Mbenga a lot.

'Do you think I haven't waited long enough for that surprise?' Mbenga asked and scratched his itching scalp. 'You may be having wrong ideas in your head, Boy. I still have many days. Do not fool yourself that I am dying any time soon. While waiting I will keep complaining.'

'Not for too long,' Sadi assured him and bent forward again over the bucket of dirty washings he had steeped in powdered soap and bleach the night before. His mind jeered at him for uttering a hollow promise. Not for too long – when then? And how did he plan to transfigure overnight? Hollow promise indeed!

From the corner of his eye, Sadi saw his father remove the chewing stick from his mouth. The lashing wasn't over yet.

'If your mother was alive, Sadi, you would have been chewed around like this chewing stick and spat out in tiny pieces for blocking those ears from receiving good advice.' Mbenga waved the battered twig as he said these words. 'I have not stopped pinching my ears and wondering why you haven't chosen a woman yet. Just step out of that gate and look up the road and see how many beautiful women roam up and down, staring hungrily into the eyes of every prospective man. Some very young ones even stare at me.' Mbenga laughed. After a short while he said, 'I stopped to see Mbodi's baby yesterday. Just imagine small, stubborn Mbodi! What is his English name again?'

'Kevin,' Sadi said. Here was it! The comparison had started. Mbodi was now a father, just like Gabriel was a successful lawyer. What about Anthony the famous builder? The chain was endless.

'Yes, Kevin! Just imagine Kevin today a happy father! I used to see him and that small girl at Elombo's place. That was long ago. About six years or so. Nobody could imagine back in those days that they would stick to each other to the extent of making a baby and living together.' He nodded his head appreciatively. He must be thinking of how

exceptionally mature-minded Kevin must be from the rest of the boys of his generation to keep a single girl for this long.

'Personally, I am not asking you for a grandchild,' Mbenga went on. 'Maybe I am saying my mind clearly. Well, like every father, I will also like to carry a grandson before I go. I deserve that honour. Don't you think so?' This he said in a broken voice.

'I know all that, Papa,' Sadi said quietly. He could sense his father's sorrow.

'No, you don't,' Mbenga said in a low voice. 'Look into my eyes, Son, and listen to me. What I want to make clear is this: even if not for children, you still need a woman who will pray for you in those moments when your mind is too busy with the numerous cares of this life. I have always told you how your mother stayed awake at night praying for me while I was away with my fishing companions telling stories of our frivolous adventures with free women as we sieved the rough sea for fish. I know today that her prayers were what helped in keeping me alive and making our family whatever it was in those days. Since she died – '

He stopped and put back his chewing stick into his mouth. His eyes became cloudy as he stared blankly at a spot somewhere in the distant grey morning sky. Sadi felt sorry for him. Whenever Mbenga's mind was troubled, he revisited his memory of his wife, hurting himself the more with the thoughts of those happy moments with Catherine.

'It is my duty to play your mother's role,' he said after a while, his tone even softer. 'From my grave I do not want to hear you regretting that I never told you what you are supposed to be told. Look for a girl, find a wife and make a home, and start being happy. Give my soul the peace it needs even if I don't deserve it.'

'There is time for everything, Papa,' Sadi said and knew this was again another feeble excuse. Old Mbenga wasn't about to sit back and wait, hoping for *time* to take a decision

on behalf of his son. While he was still alive and had a functional mouth, he would sing his feeling.

Mbenga removed the chewing stick from his mouth again and spat the particles. 'The time is now, Sadi,' he said in a firm voice. 'The moment is now, Child. I know what is blinding you and this brings me to the next point of my visit.'

He moved from the window to the door, shuffling aside the spanners and several other tools and vehicle spare parts that littered the floor of the living room.

'You have to sell that bus or give it out to someone,' Mbenga said with an air of finality and shot an arrow of spittle right across the veranda to the trench that ran under the veranda stairs. He sat down on the long bench where Sadi had found him sleeping the night before with his small brown travelling bag dangling over his muddied black sandals by the stripe from the curve of his elbow.

'I have been a fool to think that you will come to this realization on your own. I have been wrong as usual. You have strayed for too long and still fail to see that you are wasting your energy chasing a squirrel while an antelope is rotting in a trap you had abandoned long ago. By now you should have seen for yourself that you are not made to be a bus driver. Stop running in the wrong road. I am not saying that there are menial and superior professions. No. what I am saying is that we all have a path laid out for us that we must be assisted, if necessary, to identify. As a father who knows his child, I am helping you use your inner eye. I ask you to open it and you will see. That is all. '

This was the second time Mbenga had openly expressed his disapproval of Sadi's decision to be an inter-urban transport bus driver. The first opposition came the day Sadi brought home the second-hand bus he had bought using his savings from income earned as a park clerk.

Sadi had driven over to his father's compound in Njok, a small village situated some twelve kilometres from Njopongo, for the customary benediction ceremony. On his arrival, he

bought a ten-litre jug of palm wine, a bottle of *afofo* and a crate of beer. Mbenga invited some neighbours and friends to partake in the ceremony. Mbenga lived alone. He had refused to remarry after his wife's death. And Sadi's visit had been abrupt. There was, therefore, no food to accompany the drinks. Nobody complained. After all, it wasn't everyday that one received an invitation to a free drink.

'As any father who wishes his son well, I cannot refuse to bless this car, a product of your sweat,' Mbenga had said that evening in the presence of the men and women who had gathered for the benediction rites. 'I watched you grow. I saw you creep, stand, tauter, walk and run. I heard you cry and laugh. God gave me the strength to hold your hand to a man. Neighbours, what I am saying is that I know my son. Sadi is not a driver. He has a fine and sharp mind like mine when I was younger. As a boy I watched him draw and paint and even sing. I still have some of his drawings in my trunk to this day. Look at Catherine's kitchen over there.' He pointed towards the door leading to the backyard.

'This man sitting beside me today, when he was still a boy, opened his first poultry in that room. A poultry that paid his fees into Form Two, bought his books and a new pair of uniform and shoes.' He turned to face Sadi.

'Sadi, you are an artist, a creator, a producer of . . . how do they say it again? Yes, a maker of tangible products. That is my judgment!' He proclaimed as though revealing a prophecy. 'But as it is, like Jonas in the days of old, you will run around thinking you are escaping from yourself until the day that shark will swallow you and take you to where you are supposed to be.'

With these words said, Mbenga had picked up a bottle of 33 Export from the crate and asked Sadi to uncork it. Sadi had done so with his teeth as there wasn't a beer opener.

Bottle in hand, Mbenga had gone on to say, 'As I was saying, today we live in a community where eight out of ten of us live a life of sadness. Nobody seems to be doing the job

he or she loves. We are living in a period of absolute pretence – in a world where hypocrisy is the hallmark of brilliance. This evil called pretence brings rotten grieve to the heart. Yes, dark sadness like the type that blinded Judas to his death. We take up professions because they are popular or because they hold prospects of enabling us earn our daily bread. For the sake of survival, we live the rest of our days grappling for mediocrity from the moment we wake up in the morning till the last seconds we are caught into the hot embrace of sweaty sleep.'

He went on to repeat that Sadi was an artist, a vocation his spirit made him identify after he obtained his A' Levels and pushed him to enrol in Graphics Engineering with a clandestine professional college in Buea. Barely four months into the program in which Mbenga bled two hundred and seventy four thousand francs, the Minister of Higher Education slammed a ban that closed the doors of the Oxford Centre of Vocational Training for eight months. When the college finally regularized its existence and reopened its doors, it expected its old and new students to contribute towards covering the administrative cost it had incurred in obtaining its legality. Mbenga had been drained. He no longer had any more money to spend. Sadi had started a job as a park ticket clerk and wasn't ready to hand his menial savings into the hands of the administrators of OCVT Buea. He had hatched a new vision; save enough money to purchase a vehicle for public transport.

Talking about derailed vocations, Old Mbenga as he was called right back in his early twenties had been a fine musician and a terrific dancer. Mainly his fishermen colleagues knew his prowess as a musician as he mostly sang and danced on the stern of his canoe while they fished at night under the moonlight in the middle of the Mongo far from human habitation. Those who knew of his talent were split into two camps: those who mocked him saying he had been in a haste to come to this life that he had jumped out of God's creation

mould half baked. And there are those who loudly sang his praises with the hidden motive of greasing their way into Mbenga's heart of trust in order to enable them sap what they could from his carelessly guarded talent.

Superstar Sasko Yasi, the king of conservative Makossa, for instance, was the chieftain of this second category. He bought more than twelve songs from Mbenga for a bottle of Johnny Walker a song, a few bottles of beer during rehearsal sessions and the promise of a new suit after the release of an album. Sasko bought Mbenga an *okrika* suit once and that was after one of Mbenga's hit songs won for Sasko the Music d'Or in nineteen eighty-nine. The rest had been gaseous promises. Like most men endowed with divine gifts, Mbenga placed little or no value to his creative talent. The songs he composed came to him so easily and freely that he saw nothing wrong in giving them out for free too. 'Freely received, freely you give,' he often chanted.

Sadi didn't think he would ever understand why his father never took to the music studios but preferred singing his pieces to the fish in the silence of the night with the moonlight glittering on the surface of the Mongo. If he ever had a reason for not taking his music public, Mbenga never talked about it. Yet he was always the first to moan that Sadi was just one of the thousands of young men who have been forced by immaterial circumstances to abandon the divine course of their lives only to end up frowningly embracing jobs that only exposed them to mediocrity and unethical quests for unattainable excellence.

With a bottle of beer in his hand and the neighbours gazing up at him, Mbenga had walked to the door and then stopped. He turned around to face the men and women.

'Last year, my friend Eyango Pierre Totto, an excellent doctor in agronomy, was appointed Director of Taxation when all of us sitting here desperately need people like him to show us how we can stop crickets from eating our young egusi and maize shoots. When I asked Pierre how he felt after

his appointment, he said he was very happy and proud. It was an opportunity for him to get his family and friends to higher heights, he told me. What a shame. My classmate Bassan Thomas, served as Minister of Public Works for three years. While he built his mansions in Kribi and Sokolo and sent all his children to Europe, the potholes in the road from Bonaberi bridge to Bekoko expanded in width and depth. When we can't deliver, we resort to pretence, thievery and even witchcraft. We mock ourselves! Please, neighbours, let us go outside.'

The men and women got up from their seats, each of them quickly emptying their cups in order to have a free hand to receive a bottle of beer. Sadi handed out the drinks, a bottle each.

With open bottles in hand, they all flocked out after Mbenga to the front yard where Sadi's bus was parked.

Mbenga filled his mouth with the beer from his bottle. He danced slowly round the vehicle, spraying forth the liquid on the car bodywork and pouring some directly from the bottle to the earth around the tires, calling on the spirits on-the-other-side to bless Sadi with a vision so bright that it would penetrate the darkness of self-doubt into the nest where his calling patiently laid. He prayed that one day the bus, like the shark, would drive him to his Nineveh where his destiny waited.

Today, almost three years after Sadi took to the highway to earn a living, here was Mbenga asking him to sell the bus he had blessed. Mbenga must have waited for too long for the shark to come by that he had lost patience and was now about to try another trick. From the look of things, Mbenga might have convinced himself that Sadi's shark was dead. It was useless counting on it any longer.

'Get that bus out of your way and you will see the difference this brings in your life,' Mbenga urged, leaning backward against the wall.

'You know I cannot sell the bus,' Sadi said, not quite sure of why he said so. 'At least not yet,' he added hastily. This bus, known in the motor park as *Mbamba* because of its age and numerous mechanical troubles, was his main source of income. It was also true that he hadn't achieved much from it. For instance, he hadn't been able to buy land on which he could build his own house. But what can anyone achieve from this transport business with endless police and gendarme control posts? Armed men in uniform made decent living from a public transport vehicle as difficult as squeezing water from a nylon raincoat. But selling his *Mbamba* was pushing his luck too far. He couldn't part with his life mate just like that. Not now.

Sadi shook his head. 'Impossible,' he murmured.

'Yes, you have to.' It sounded like an order. It was actually one. 'It is very possible. I have to get you out of your misery and save my pride before it is too late.' Mbenga poked his finger towards the gate. 'Sell that thing and come back home. You can reopen and develop that poultry you started in your mother's kitchen. I have enough land to hold a ranch.'

It had began like a game kids often played, except for the fact that Sadi's went further than just a play with sawdust, chicks and feed. On Sadi's first Third Term holidays as a college student, two years after his mother's death, he transformed his mother's kitchen into poultry with the assistance of his many admirers who were still in primary school who came every day to listen to stories of town and college life. Mbenga had bought him twenty chicks from one of those vendors who came to Njok market on Thursdays pushing the chicks in two-wheel trucks. Sadi fed the chicks with crushed maize and fish flour he made from the fish dirt his father gathered from the women selling smoked fish in the market. After Sadi returned to school, his father sold the first batch of mature birds for forty thousand francs and bought more chicks to breed against the Christmas peak season. Barely a week before Christmas, the flu visited, killed

all the birds, and made Mbenga so angry that he closed the poultry definitely. After all, taking care of the birds took too much of his fishing time.

Going back to poultry today was a tricky venture. It would be outright foolishness to jump into it without a foothold somewhere else. No matter how lucrative it might seem to be at the moment, precautions need to be taken. It didn't hurt to keep a door open, in case –

Sadi shrugged his shoulders.

'I know you are a pusher, Son,' Mbenga said with a bright reassuring grin. 'Before long you will realize how useful you will be to some of us who can no longer withstand the cold of the *lamba* water. Fish is no longer coming out of the *lamba*. With all this sun! Mongo no longer overflows its banks. There is no floodwater to sweep the weeds away. Weeds have grown and filled the entire water. No place for fish to swim. We shall all need your chicken.'

Sadi fitted a hanger into the last clean shirt and hung it on the clothesline on the veranda.

'You know why I came, don't you?' Mbenga asked, sounding as though he was only getting up from sleep.

Sadi looked up at him and smiled. After all this talking, was it possible to determine Mbenga's mission to his son's house with certainty?

'You told me you wanted nets,' Sadi answered, secretly thankful that the old man had swayed the subject away from marriage and changing jobs.

'Yes, nets brought me here,' Mbenga said the same words he had used the night before to explain his visit. Both of them could recall that Sadi had proposed more than a dozen times that his father should come over and rest from fishing in the cold waters of the swamp for at least one month. Mbenga had always found an excuse for not leaving Njok. Rest for Mbenga had stopped being discussed between these two. Whenever Mbenga came to town, he came for a specific mission that took him not more than two days.

'I need six meters of two-and-a-half fingers and eight or nine meters of four fingers,' Mbenga explained. 'This year whatever fish is left in that *lamba* will call me by the name Old Mbenga. There is this narrow stretch of water after Mpondo's farm. I don't think anyone has ever put a net there. I even saw a playground for crocodiles around there one day I was searching around. I want to try it. One never knows.'

Mbenga Jonathan was a fisherman. He had fished in the creeks in Njopongo *when there was still fish in the water*, as he used to say, and *when there was still money with which to buy fish*. He got married from fishing, prepared his wife's first and only fruitful maternity basket from fishing, built his house in Njok from fishing. When he moved his family from Njopongo to their new home in Njok, he got Simon the Ijoh chief who lived in a shack at the bank of the Mongo River to dig him a fishing canoe. The canoe had cost Mbenga twenty-six thousand francs because Simon considered him a prospective friend. With his canoe idling on the waters at Ijoh Beach, Mbenga recruited a team of three willing and hardworking fishermen – men who could sing with him while filling their canoe with fresh catch. Thrice a week they went down to explore the Mongo. And within ten months of his settling in Njok, Mbenga was the main supplier of fresh fish to Njok, Mukunda, Moquo and the neighbouring towns.

Then Catherine died in August 1985. Barely three months after her death, Mbenga suffered a stroke that almost left him paralyzed. While he was convalescing, one of his fishing partners made away with his canoe and dragnet. Sadi was eleven then and in college in Koka. It was hard to come out of the losses but Mbenga finally did. He embraced celibacy, left the fish in the Mongo and turned his attention to the swamps where the fish was still plenty and naïve and the energy required to get them to land wasn't enormous. To this day, he fished in the swamps and every year, for the past four years, it was Sadi's duty to replace his torn nets.

'Are you serious about returning today?' Sadi asked his father.

'As soon as I get my nets and the assurance that you will give yourself the opportunity to start a new life, I will leave.' Mbenga coughed and spat some more phlegm. 'Some days ago some people came to Njok with a lorry, looking for fowls to buy. They swept Joe's poultry clean and still went back very disappointed. Yet, we have young men like you wasting away because pride has blinded you from what good you can be to yourself and to people like me. You will make a good breeder. Come home and start learning to put your God-given skills to work.'

Sadi had hardly opposed his father. And he was not willing to do so now. Old Mbenga once told him that the mouth was both a lethal snake's fangs and a curative black stone. 'Be careful what you say,' he had said. 'It is with that same mouth that life was given that life shall be taken.'

What worried Sadi was whether his father had thought this all out before making his pronouncement about his fate. Old Mbenga might not have thought of the possibility of setting up a poultry farm and still keeping his transport business. He only had to partition his time appropriately between the two activities. A brilliant idea!

But how would he raise the required capital?

He had to think this out. An additional source of regular income would do him so much good.

Who knows?

Finished with his washing, Sadi rinsed his soapy feet and then poured the soapy water into the shallow drainage running below the stairs to the edge of the fence.

'I know you want the best from me,' Sadi said. He hesitated for a while before adding. 'I will think it over.'

Mbenga shrugged. 'Whatever you choose!' he said. 'Just have it in your mind that until a seed of corn dies, we cannot eat maize. We all have a divine mission in this earth that, unfortunately, we do not try enough to identify that mission

because of fear of failure. I have sat and observed you for all these years. You need to be a man by taking one tough decision. Now tell me about the surprise you have for Old Mbenga. I am not ready to eat in a restaurant today. I want to eat your woman's food.'

Sadi regarded his knuckles that were now white and red in places with traces of blisters. Wouldn't this man put aside the idea of a wife for a moment?

Like his father, Sadi detested eating in those roadside restaurants built without walls, selling food garnished with the dust raised from the wheels of speeding cars and the spittle sprayed forth from hungry mouths asking the price of meat by speaking directly into the open pot of soup. To avoid picking another quarrel with Jita Celine who sold rice and stew at the motor park, and most importantly upon Sirri's heartbreaking insistence, he had thrown away the slow-cooking old gas plate he had used in his high school days and bought a battered gas cooker. He also bought an ancient refrigerator. The last time Sirri visited, she stuffed the refrigerator with food that sustained him for almost a month.

Today, there wasn't even a bottle of water in the fridge.

Thinking of Sirri made his stomach churn. It was easier to think of forgetting the woman you love but hard or almost impossible to do the actual forgetting. He couldn't remember how often he had struggled to convince himself that Sirri wasn't made for him. Her uncle had hammered it into his head over the phone a week before. His Lordship Lobe had made him understand that getting Atam Sirri any closer to himself was a headless man's dream. He loved her alright but that was as far as he could go with her. Love and nothing more. Almighty Lobe had made it clear to him that his niece was no match for a bus driver.

'Go search in the debris of your neighbourhood,' Lord Mayor Lobe had rudely barked at him over the phone when Sadi had called the Lobes' home number hoping to get Sirri

on the line. 'There you will find the scarecrow that was created from your ribs.'

'I will remember,' Sadi had said and cut the call. He had paid the callbox girl and returned to his rickety bus with bells of rage clanging in his ears and swelling his head. At that instant, small mischievous voices had reminded him of the two months rents he owed the landlady who was expected in the compound at any moment. Not long ago he had replaced the knocked engine of his bus, using the four hundred and thirty thousand francs Sirri had given him to keep for her. She had said it was her registration money for a professional course that was due to commence in December.

If only he had enough money to make a woman comfortable, he would have forged ahead like a bull against all odds and taken Sirri for his wife. Lobe may rain down hot bricks and acid if he wanted. Unfortunately, Sadi's wishes where hedged on the terrible word IF.

If, if and always IF!

All he owned were debts and a rickety bus and a thick volume of ifs.

'Let me rinse my mouth,' Sadi heard his father say and saw him get up from the bench and enter the house to get water. He looked older than his sixty seven years, already curving. It was not easy to keep all those long bones erect after a lifetime of toiling.

Sadi didn't hear the zinc gate rattle. Even if he had heard, he wouldn't have bothered to know who was entering. The students living in the row of apartments to his left were a maddening nuisance. Most of them returned from holidays only the day before, a whole week after school resumption. As usual, they kept the entire neighbourhood vibrating on its feet with the loud music blaring from sophisticated speakers placed right beside their open doors. It was like a competition among the boys to see who could be the noisiest both in speech and laughter and the blasts from their discothèque speakers. They equally had another stinking reputation of

beating up girls. A week hardly went by without a girl being punched and striped half-naked. Parents had come and screamed and cried. A few convocations had been served from the gendarmerie and police. As it turned out, these boys who lived their homes to rent apartments that cost seventeen thousand francs a month didn't come from poor homes. A few calls from the boys' parents were sufficient to get the charges dropped. Those fights were another reason Mbenga wouldn't spend more than two nights in his son's house.

'How do you expect me to rest in a house where the bed jumps around with the vibration of outrageous music from morning to night?' Mbenga had asked Sadi angrily one hot afternoon as he packed his bag to return to Njok.

The compound was noisier than a social night in the campus ballroom in Sadi's high school days. For some time now Sadi had been looking for another apartment whose landlord didn't demand the payment of six months rents in advance and a caution equivalent to one month's rent. Immediately he found a quieter place, he would leave that same day.

'I was right, here he is!'

Sadi turned around at the sound of the voice.

Kake Mulopo the chorister came in through the gate closely followed by Mulem Denis, a squad plumber turned politician in his early fifties. Mulem was smiling like a tamed drill as the two walked down the badly kept lawn littered with discarded plastic bags, pieces of wood, bottles and cans of tomato and milk. Sadi's apartment was the fifth, counting from the right edge of the yard.

Sadi leaned on the waist-high brick wall separating his veranda from Ntui's and waited.

'Good morning Sadi,' Kake said as he climbed up the steps to where Sadi stood waiting with his arms folded across his chest. 'I told Denis we can find you at home. Can we go in?'

'What do you want?' Sadi asked, not attempting to hide his annoyance.

'We want to talk,' Kake said and grinned, revealing a set of perfect white teeth.

Even if his parlour wasn't littered with a jack, spanners, pliers, chair cushions and a spare tire, he wouldn't still have admitted them in. Mulem and Kake worked for Mapito Lobe Cornelius, the Managing Director of Seams Incorporated who was at the same time the incumbent mayor and head of the VPP list during the last municipal and council elections that almost killed Sadi. Worst of all, Lobe was Sirri's valiant uncle.

Putting Sirri's end aside, the memory was still fresh in Sadi's mind of what happened to him during those elections.

'What do you want to talk about?' Sadi demanded.

Kake coughed to clear his thin musical voice. He was the choir master of Saints Music Group. He joined the choir at the minimum admission age of forty-three. It was said that a year after his admission, in the month of December, SMG travelled to Ngaoundere for a fundraising music tour. They planned to pay their return train tickets from the concert gate-entry fees. After long hours of waiting for an audience that wasn't coming, they had to hire three motorbikes and megaphones and ride round the town begging the public to attend the concert for free. It was Kake's idea. He couldn't stand the embarrassment of having to bundle their equipment and new songs back to the South without a performance. Thirty three persons showed up at last. No gate fees were collected but thanks to Kake's smooth tongue and connections in the higher rungs of party and administrative circles, the group paid its way back to the south and still had leftovers of about a hundred thousand francs. It surprised no one when Kake talked his way to the helm of the youth wing of VPP.

He was capable of all kinds of bargains. And Sadi was sure he was on duty at the moment and wished Mbenga was in the room beyond earshot.

'We have a problem we think you can help us take care of,' Kake said and deliberately allowed an uncomfortable moment of silence to settle in during which the still air seem to hang like a cloud of choking smoke around the veranda.

'I am listening,' Sadi prompted and shuffled his feet restlessly.

Kake went down one of the steps and looked along the row of closed doors to the right.

'Neighbours around?' he asked.

Sadi shrugged. 'As you can see for yourself, all the doors are locked. Who do you want to see?'

Kake laughed and walked back to the veranda with his eyes scrutinizing Sadi's clothes on the line.

'Is she around?' he asked.

'Who?'

'His Lordship's girl – I mean that one in the university. Denis, what's her name again?'

Mulem shrugged. 'Never know her name.'

'Is she the one you are looking for?' Sadi asked, making a tremendous effort to remain calm.

'No – really – no. I just want to remark that it is about time you get yourself a permanent sweet sixteen to be washing your clothes at least,' Kake said and laughed. 'You must not be doing this again, Presi. This is work for a woman.'

'Thank you,' Sadi replied. 'I don't think my domestic life is what brought you here.' He fervently hoped that his father wasn't eavesdropping.

Kake snapped his fingers and moved closer to Sadi.

'You are right! NMORA will be electing their executive bureau this week,' he said almost in a whisper and watched Sadi intently with his small calculating eyes.

NMORA was the acronym of Njopongo Motorcycle Riders Association, a grouping of young men who served as motorcycle taxi riders. Six months earlier, they began holding meetings at the various junctions where they gathered to wait for passengers to discuss their common problems and ways of ameliorating their working conditions. This evolved into inter-junction groupings on more spacious grounds like the space in front of Sentinel Clinic. Early this month posters began appearing on electric poles and fences announcing a *Grand Rally of All Benskiners* to elect a governing bureau.

'If we need to sleep in peace in this town, this group does not have to be organized,' Kake went on, his voice taking on a firm note. 'I mean they shouldn't have been allowed to have a formal structure. But from what we see, it is too late. There is no way to stop them now. Arrung does not like it.'

Kake stopped as though expecting Sadi to say something.

Sadi was staring at the coconut tree across the yard and wondering why the fruits never got mature. He had never seen a single brown fruit up that tree since he moved in here. He didn't even think the landlord had ever harvested any of the fruits as the tree incautiously leaned out of the fence towards the road, offering every adventurous passerby with a long stick the opportunity to plug its sweet fruits.

'Arrung is the First Assistant Mayor,' Sadi said as though he was talking to the coconut tree. 'He can stop whatever activity and whoever he wishes in this town.' He had the feeling that Kake was telling a lie. It was Lobe who must have sent them. Arrung was a relaxed man who wouldn't need these two to speak for him. If Arrung wanted Sadi to do anything for him, he would call Sadi to his office and tell him what he wanted. The Arrung Sadi knew was a negotiator like Kake – and a fine negotiator at that. If the VPP ever had any steadfast followers, it was thanks to Arrung's commitment to a course he believed in.

'Unfortunately, that will be difficult – impossible – I think unnecessary,' Kake said. 'We have realized that it will be

outright foolishness to try to stop these boys now. Nobody wants another riot in this town. After serious deliberations, we think that we can use this occasion to our advantage. It is an opportunity we have been offered to control this band of hoodlums. And that is where you come in.'

Sadi stirred, frowned questioningly at Kake and then shifted his gaze back to the leaves of the coconut tree dancing lazily to the teasing soft breeze. He could smell the game already. From the corners of his eyes he saw Kake put out his hand and Mulem drop a brown envelope.

'His Lordship sent you this!' Kake said with a fetish smile that Sadi knew so well. This was the game Kake cherished playing and emerging a winner. His victories were partly because of his choice of the victims – people who were hungry and willing to do all within their powers to feed themselves – and partly due to his smooth tongue and keen observation.

But with Sadi he seemed to have been imposed a victim he didn't master or hadn't prepared for. Sadi thought Kake's luck had met a boulder. Bringing out that envelope had been a compound tactical error. Arrung wouldn't stoop that low to send a bribe package. Sadi hadn't performed any service for him yet. How could he –

It must have been the frown on Sadi's face. Kake quickly switched on the fetish grin that revealed he was aware of being on the brink of losing this match.

'I will explain,' Kake said hastily, raising a hushing hand when he probably judged that Sadi was offended and was about to say something to that effect. He placed the envelope on top of the wall on which Sadi was leaning.

'You are the president of Njopongo Transporter's Syndicate, the umbrella union in which NMORA is just a tiny entity.'

Sadi said nothing.

'Well, we are not the ones to give you lectures on your job description. Are we?'

'No. Not at all!' Mulem said, shook his head furiously and attempted a crocket smile.

'You know you are the one to oversee these elections, don't you?' Kake asked Sadi.

Sadi didn't reply. He knew the bike riders were planning to hold an election in the nearest future but as the authorized observer, he hadn't received any formal notification.

Another moment of silence followed. Sadi must have been expected to say something. When he maintained his gaze across the yard, Kake shrugged and bit his lower lip.

'Arrung wants you to run the elections on a specific plan, for specific results, for the good of everyone,' Kake said conclusively and pushed the brown envelope towards Sadi. 'He sent you this as a token for listening to us.'

Sadi gritted his teeth as he hoisted himself up the wall separation and sat down, dangling his legs.

'Am I permitted to know the details of that specific plan for specific results? When are these elections, for example?' Sadi asked.

'Of course,' Mulem proclaimed hastily. 'The elections will hold on Saturday morning at ten in Felons Hall. Some five days from now. All we want from you is to have our man in there to keep things in order. You remember what these boys did in February. Nobody wants a group like that one which cannot be controlled. We have a candidate that we want to impose as president of NMORA. Your job will be to ensure that our man wins. This way we can keep those hooligans on permanent check. We don't want motorcycle riders dictating the pace of life in this municipality or anywhere else. Not anymore.'

Sadi couldn't help smiling. Here was Mulem, the owner of four motorcycles, calling riders hooligans when he had just recently been saved from the teeth of misery. Mulem had found his fortune one afternoon in the ceiling of Mbida's house where he had climbed to identify a plumbing fault. He stumbled on cartons of money the deputy Director of

Customs had starched in the ceiling. It was said that Mulem came down from the ceiling with a carton containing several million francs. When Mbida realized what had happened, he invited Mulem to his house again, offered him more money and swore him to silence, promising to patronize him and lift him to fame. With Mbida's endorsement, Mulem buried his plumbing tools and grew from strength to strength in Njopongo's public scene. There was, however, one part of him that failed to grow: his brains.

'Do you have any idea of some of the issues that made those boys to start thinking of forming a union?' Sadi asked Mulem. He saw the perplexed look on Mulem's face.

'What do you mean?' Mulem asked. 'They are only looking for an opportunity to cause big trouble if given the slightest chance.'

'I will tell you what is happening,' Sadi said. 'First, these boys are jobless without their motorcycles. The police and council security men are making life extremely miserable for these children. They are the ones who forced these boys to look for a way of protecting themselves. You know what they do to impounded motorcycles, don't you?'

'I don't understand.' Mulem turned to Kake for guidance. Kake folded his arms across his chest and listened with a slight grin on the edge of his mouth.

'They auction the motorcycles to themselves and pocket the money,' Sadi said, his voice rising. 'A motorcycle that was bought from borrowed three hundred and eighty thousand francs is impounded and given out for thirty five thousands. What is the lord mayor doing about this? Public figures openly extort and harass these struggling boys in broad daylight along the same road that our lord mayors and commissioners and commandants use every day. What is being done about that? Everyone accuses them of not channelling their problems to the right quarters. Now that they want to organize themselves in order to have a single voice, what do you accuse them of?'

'What are you really talking about?' Mulem asked, his voice rising, his furrowed forehead revealing how embarrassed he felt. He was quickly getting annoyed as usual.

'Look Sadi.' Kake unfolded his arm and picked his nostrils. 'In this life there is what we call trade-off and collateral damages.'

'I see,' Sadi said. 'And in that trade-off of yours, the masses get sacrificed.'

'Unfortunately, yes, if you look at it that way,' Kake said softly. 'We have no choice. Some people have to bleed for others to live. That is how the world was made to operate. We met it that way.'

'That is it!' Mulem shouted his agreement.

From the angry look in Mulem's face, Sadi could see that Mulem would feel much better if he could chew one of Sadi's ears. The man was visibly regretting having come to Sadi's house again. Sadi began wondering what Mulem had at stake here. Could he be the candidate hiding in the dark?

On the eve of the last municipal election rerun, a few months after he had almost been beaten to death, these two men had led a group that went around doing what they described as 'finishing touches' for Mapito Lobe. The drivers' syndicate had been one of their stopovers. Sadi wasn't in town that night. He was attending to his father who had fallen ill again. In his absence, Kake and Mulem got Michael Esunge, the secretary general of NTRASYN, to assemble as many drivers as were willing to vote in as many pooling stations as possible come the day of the elections rerun, just as they had done before. Each driver got two thousand francs for each vote cast. And of course there were plenty of free entry tickets to the grand reception at Felons Hall after the imminent victory had been proclaimed.

'We cannot change the system of things,' Mulem said hoarsely. 'God made it that way. We own the system and have mastered how to manipulate it for the benefit of those who want to be part of a good life.'

Terrific! Yesterday's plumber today owned the political system of the sub-division. Who said the days of miracles were over? 'And you think I am part of that system you own?' Sadi demanded, unable to stifle a grin. 'I know moral principles mean nothing to anyone these days. Our consciences have been poisoned, frozen, imprisoned – '

'You are merely helping them get a leader,' Mulem howled back, glaring at Sadi as though he was a naughty child who let a cock escape on Christmas Eve. 'They cast their secret ballots and know the outcome is their collective decision. I can't see how you will be responsible for any conscience problems that anyone may have.'

Kake hardly lost his calm, especially when he saw a game slipping off his hands. Now he raised a hushing hand at Mulem and said in his fine musical voice. 'There is no reason to get annoyed, President Sadi. Our people never go to the trouble of having conscience stocktaking.' As someone once said, Kake's voice could lure the demon of death to sleep.

'And even if they do,' Kake went on confidently, 'At the end of the useless exercise all they will find is a good reason to be proud of having rightly performed their civic duty. Your duty, Presi, is to help them realize their objective. Make them feel that they are participating towards bringing a change to their lives and the life of the community.'

'As simple as that,' Mulem concluded.

Sadi realized it was aimless reasoning with these two. As far as he knew both men, at his best Mulem qualified for a spare part of a rigging machine. He was a vicious bully at his calmest mood. As for Kake, he was ready to butter-talk from dawn to dusk so long as his audience was awake.

'I suggest you use Michael Esunge as you did last time,' Sadi said and jumped down. 'He better understands your tactics and may have better use of your envelope. I am not interested.'

'This child doesn't understand things the way we do. He doesn't understand how this thing works,' Mulem hissed in

utter disappointment as though Sadi was messing up with a simple toy machine Mulem had painstakingly designed for children of his age. 'I told you this, Kake. He is useless! He doesn't understand anything.'

'I don't need to understand,' Sadi said calmly. 'Like most of the people you see out there, I too have given up and abandoned the playground to rascals like you. You just go ahead and enjoy your game. Please, leave us to lie and lick our wounds in painful peace. Now can you leave?'

'You are a blind child that doesn't know the difference between daylight and midnight,' Mulem growled and picked up the envelope.

'You may call me any name you choose,' Sadi retorted. 'We don't have any reason to fight each other, do we? Just tell yourself that you have met a stupid man who doesn't understand a thing as you rightly say. It is easier that way for everyone. Very easy'

Kake began to descend the steps and then paused on the last step.

'Have you ever tried to find out who cheated you of your victory last time and almost got you beaten to death?' Kake asked, reminding Sadi of the last municipal elections. 'What Lobe did was only his duty to the party and nothing personal, you see – cleaning up the voter's register to ensure he remained in the position to award a few more contracts to Seams. You may like to remember that what we do is play well the game we know best – and that is ruining people like you who choose a pit to the hilltop.' He paused for a moment before adding, 'Sadi, you are ruined!'

With these words, Kake and Mulem walked away, leaving Sadi with his teeth in his lips. His heart beat so fast that he had to draw in deep breaths to calm himself. In his heated mind he added a hundred more feathers to his anger hat towards Sirri's uncle, the Lord Mayor Mapito Lobe Cornelius.

'Azania will love this,' Mbenga said from behind him. He was at the door and staring after the departing two. 'They are

quite an interesting bunch. Is this the type of work you do in your spare time? Is this what that president thing of yours is all about?'

Sadi sighed. 'I think I need a change,' he said, picked up the empty bucket and walked down the lawn towards the communal tap in the centre of the yard.

*

As I listened to Sadi tell his story, a popular saying kept crossing my mind. In fact beggars can't be choosers. Therefore he who has the privilege of choice is not a beggar. In the bondage of slavery there is no choice. That is why freedom of choice is a fundamental requirement of a liberated society.

In this country of abundance, even madmen know that there is more than enough for anyone to beg. I recall my first and only visit to my uncle who lives in Enugu after my G.C.E O'Levels. I was standing by the roadside waiting to board a cab when I noticed a madman hurry to a trashcan which was more or less empty. He spread the front of his torn shirt to serve as a bag and began picking food items from the trashcan and putting them in the fold of his shirt. He didn't leave any fallout on the ground as there didn't seem to be much trash in the can. What his shirt couldn't carry, which wasn't much, he stuffed into his mouth and then hurried away, glancing warily about him, probably watching out for any threat of being bullied and robed of his treasure.

A few years later, I witnessed a similar scene at Roundpoint Deido in Douala. I was then on internship in a brewery company and had just closed for the day. I was waiting for a friend who usually offered me a lift to my sister's place where I lived. It was five forty eight by my watch and the traffic at the roundabout had built so fast

within the last twenty minutes while I waited. In the haste and jostling that went on around me, there was a madman. He walked leisurely over to the trashcan placed under a tree, taking all his time. I noticed he was humming and whistling and dancing with light steps as he approached the can. Then with the slow movements of someone trying to decide which of the many soft drink brands to take out of the refrigerator, he began to sample from the full trashcan. He pushed stuffs around, retrieved a loaf of bread which he scrutinized, frowned at the green moulds before flinging it into the clogged gutter nearby. He continued in his rummaging, selecting from the trash and littering the surrounding with the rejects. He took almost ten long minutes to stuff the pockets of his ragged trousers with choice food before walking away, humming and hopping lightly with one leg and then another. Immediately he left, a hefty dog which had been waiting impatiently in a corner ran up to the foot of the tree and began selecting from what the madman had discarded.

That I called the beauty of choice in a land of plenty! And talking of choice, it is one of the greatest endowments of the conscience. The choice to be honest or corrupt, rude or polite, serve or wait to be served . . .

'Why did you refuse the money?' I ask in my quest to know what prompts certain choices that might, at first glance, appear disagreeably irrational.

Sadi does not hesitate to shoot back with a question of his.

'Why should I have taken it?' He sounds annoyed, probably considering my question senseless.

'Well, you are in an uncomfortable financial situation as I see it,' I say carefully. 'The money might have done you some good. Maybe repay your debts or start that poultry farm your father proposed. I mean it might have helped you somehow.'

Sadi gawks at me as though I am a stupid kid speaking a language I don't understand.

'Easy money is spent in sweet grief,' he says, staring me in the face as though he is telling me something I ought to have known a long time ago. 'I will prefer to stay poor and when I have fever, Paracetamol of two hundred francs brings me relieve.'

Consolation of the poor, I tell myself.

'You grew up in no better situation than I did,' he goes on. 'We are from the same neighbourhood, remember. You should count yourself luckier than most of us,' Sadi says this as if accusing me of a grave betrayal. 'Yet, some of us survive because of innocent living. Yes, we survive.'

I can't agree less with him. Our parents squeezed herbs and gave us to drink in times of sickness. We have lived in darkness almost all our lives not knowing what was called electricity, using only hurricane lamps. We have drunk from the Mongo since we were still babies. Yet here we are today. We usually don't need to evacuate our loved ones to Europe in order to save their lives. They do not die with their heads lying in a pillow stuffed with stolen bank notes.

Sadi seems to be reflecting aloud, echoing my thoughts. 'I prefer to live honest and wait to reap the reward of honesty no matter how long that takes to come.'

I don't believe he is sincere. 'Yet, as a driver you give bribes to policemen,' I say.

'Madame, we are talking about voluntary decisions,' he fires back. 'What happens along our highways is pure extortion. It is theft! You and I know this! We have no choice. Who will defend us if we are taken to the police station or to court or even brought to your office with a mount of false accusations?'

Mathew chapter five, verses twenty five to twenty six, Charlotte once quoted the biblical password to justifying corruption along our highways: "*Agree with your adversary (police) quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary delivers you to the judge, the judge hands you over to the officer, and you be*

thrown in prison." In simple terms, better pay your bribe rather than start an argument.

'Okay, let us say I get your point.' I pull my weight forward in my seat. 'Talking about the rewards of dishonesty and all that, will you say losing your vehicle, your only means of livelihood, the way it happened, was some kind of divine payback?'

I think I shouldn't have asked him this question. But it is too late. Contrary to what I expect, Sadi's gaze drops to his feet. After a while of perfect silence he looks up but not at my face this time. He stares at the girl across the table from him. I see Sirri tense.

'I don't know,' Sadi says slowly. 'I cannot explain.' He seems to be asking me to obtain the answer from the girl sitting across from him. 'Maybe my shark wasn't dead after all.'

I try to surprise a smile-

Well, there isn't much anyone can explain. Sadi has made his own choice between ceding to corruption and making do with his difficult financial situation. But what about the rest? I can see someone else in that long chain receiving that envelope and doing more damage than Sadi, in his stubborn naivety, would ever have been able to accomplish.

If only the entire community can have a synchronized mindset perfectly tuned to the frequency of choices resulting in virtues accomplishments, then what a perfect world every generation will be leaving behind for the next.

But as things stand, there is no perfection anywhere. Very few of us strive to do our best towards making life agreeable to as many around us as we can.

Life is a race in which the only contestant is oneself, my mother used to tell me. Never hold the view that you measure yourself with your neighbour. You are alone. You are unique to yourself. That is why whatever we are called to do we have to do with the most of our abilities because there is no other person capable of doing it exactly our way. They may be

better or worse, but never like us. That is why we are different yet live in a common sphere of existence.

Thoughts aside, I tell myself and float back to the room. Lobe's niece is fiddling with her nails. From what Sadi has just told us, I gather it will be best to let him rest and refuel his thoughts again. It is time I turn to the girl, Sirri, for a recollection pause. After all she had asked to be here this morning even though I can't see how she is involved in what happened. But from Sadi's story, she might have a relaxing revelation to make, romantic or otherwise. Not that I feel like a matchmaker this morning. Far from it. I just feel that Sadi with the black eye had never been locked up before. This first experience must have been traumatic, certainly not like the first night-out with the girls. He looks evilly ruffled. From her haggard appearance too, Sirri at the other end hasn't had enough sleep, or any at all. Her eyes are dim and void of any signs of beholding whatever comes across her line of vision. This meeting, among other things, might help them both mend some emotional fractures. I too have lived through such moments of trial. It doesn't hurt to lay the platform for possible reconciliation.

'I gather you are Sirri Lobe,' I ask her out of sheer need to say something slightly abnormal or even stupid to an extent. She had introduced herself to me more than once.

'Sirri Atam. Lobe is my uncle,' she replies and sniffs.

'I see. Sorry for the mix-up. You called me yesterday.'

She nods.

'Who is he to you? I mean Sadi. I don't remember you answering this question yesterday.'

She bites her upper lip.

'He is my friend.'

'The one the mayor doesn't want to see you with,' Adamou announces, his eyes fixed to his notepad.

Sirri nods again.

'But that was before I left the house,' she explains and raises her head in a gesture of pure determination. She wants

to talk and free her mind. She has a story right up in her throat and she has made up her mind to tell it even if my office doesn't look like the appropriate environment for such a talk.

A sideways glance tells me Adamou's pen is giving him trouble. He is scrapping it furiously against the table.

Poor Adamou! He should have bought a full packet for this occasion.

'Yes, go on,' I say to Sirri encouragingly and then sit back on my chair and fold my arms over my breast.

2

When Sirri Atam was too depressed and saddled with a tormenting headache like the one beating drums in her head this moment, she freed her mind to rove and filter and bring to the surface some of Granny's coarse words of consolation. As she collected her change from the callbox girl, this particular vivid scene between Granny and Auntie Belame Celine landed in her mind.

It was one afternoon when Auntie Belame came to Granny's house. Granny Joki Anna Dibomba was sitting in front of her kitchen door, washing vegetable which she tied in plastic bags, froze and sold.

'I have no peace, Mama, no rest at all,' Auntie had lamented, slapping her thighs with both hands. She refused to sit down and chose to hover around Granny like a hungry tsetse fly humming a litany of complaints about how things weren't going as well as she had hoped in her marriage.

'Men cannot fashion their destiny by their strength and knowledge alone,' Granny had told her.

'My children are right here in my neck. They just called Lobe from the US to inform him that Ekale has vowed to come back to the country purposely to find and shoot him . . . his own father whenever he left prison. Can you imagine this! My own son threatening to shoot his own father! As if we are the ones who made him a criminal in the first place. Susan is now taking drugs. She gets drunk more than that your uncle in the village. Even Muto – that small rat in the house – is a pebble in my eye. She can't keep her buttocks in one school for a complete term without being dismissed. Lobe is never at home. I am sick of this life! Sick of all of them!'

'You are sick of ignorance, my child,' Granny had replied ever so slowly that sunny afternoon. 'You don't have to fold your arms and hope for things to go well for you in this life.'

Granny had stood firm against Auntie Belame's choice of Lobe for a husband. She believed that Auntie Belame was now merely paying the price of her teenage blind stubbornness. According to Granny, from day-one, Lobe reflected nothing but dishonesty and avarice like all the souls in the devil's coiling machine. Lobe got rich by stealing from the moneybags intended for the wellbeing of the masses, she accused. He played terrible tricks to enable his company win major public utility contracts in the region, did a white-washing job of the required task with a quarter of the allocated budget and stuffed the rest of the money inside the long pockets of his *agbada*. According to Granny Joki, Lord Mayor Lobe would never find lasting peace with all the sighs and groaning of his victims disturbing the Almighty's sleep.

That was Granny Joki!

If there was one fault in her, it was her inability to shut up when she spotted a dirty patch in the white linings of anyone's life. She had found no reason to accept Lobe as her son-in-law. She never ceased from reminding her daughter's husband that unless he was granted the wisdom that would enable him discern the harm he was inflicting on the people of Njopongo, he would only grow as tall and strong as a mushroom without a proud stem to keep him on his feet for long.

'You will soon crumble and rot and serve as humus for better plants,' she told him at close range the last time they had met two years before in a filling station where Granny was buying kerosene after electricity was interrupted in her house. It was reported that Lobe had proposed to purchase a standby generator for her after he overheard her explaining her power-failure problem to one lady roasting maize nearby.

'If you buy a generator to your dear mother-in-law, what happens to the rest of my neighbours in darkness?' she had asked with a sarcastic grin.

'I am not in a hurry, Son,' Granny had added. 'I walk slowly like a snail, savouring the taste of every ground I lick as I move on. I prefer it that way. That is my way.'

Nothing was urgent or too serious and worth getting hysterical about in Granny's world. As far as she lived, there were no surprises in life. Every event constituted one of those indispensable rings of the chain of life. Sirri had been opportune to listen to her recount her famous story of a young woman who had dressed up for a party and was waiting for her companion in front of her house. While this woman waited impatiently, a madman carrying a dirty bag stuffed with dirt ran past and slapped his bag against the woman's face, smearing her makeup and beautiful party dress. She was so inflamed with rage but ashamed enough not to go after the madman. She went back into the house to wash her face and reapply her make-up and change her dress before her companion showed up. And behold, as she stepped into the long corridor that led to the kitchen, her nose caught the smell of burning cloth. She soon discovered that the wind had blown a napkin on to the hot burner of her stove. In her haste to be ready on time for the dinner party, she hadn't taken time to extinguish the flame of the stove on which she had warmed her bathwater. Thanks to the madman and his dirty bag, she saved her house from fire.

That was Granny Joki and her doctrine of patience.

In order to make her point to Auntie Belame that afternoon, Granny took her hands off the bundle of *ndolle* she was picking and raised her faint-sighted eyes to peer at her daughter. Her eyes, despite their defects, were always stern and reflective in moments like these. She had a way of forcing every word and gesture into a special corner of the memory of her listener just by the way she looked at them.

'You pray!' she said like a devoted priestess, wagging a green finger stained by the vegetable. 'You pray ceaselessly for what you want. Not necessarily the type of prayer that splits planks. You need this regular conversation with your Creator, letting Him in to all your plans and decisions. This way you will come to know that God is not obliged to give you exactly what you demand from Him, especially when you prefer the dictates of your head to the wise counsel of your heart. Our plans must align with His. We are blessed because He is there to guide and protect us. He will never give you what will bring you into more anguish than that in which you are already.'

Now Sirri wasn't so sure she had not been heaped a mighty rock on her head that would broke her neck. She needed an older mind to have a look at her problem and diagnose where she went wrong. What could Granny say to rest her troubled mind? Granny seemed to have answers to even the most absurd questions life dumped on our jumbled minds. She could spring up a theory on the possible reason that prompted the creation of mosquitoes. She could attempt an explanation on why elephants ended up with tusks instead of the v-shaped horns initially designed for them. It was as though she was the One who had stood by God during creation.

As Atam Sirri crossed the gutter and started down the road towards her uncle's house where she lived, she resolved to pay Granny a visit soon. She told herself this visit must be very soon – most probably that same evening or the next day latest, depending on how her uncle received the news she was about to tell him and his wife. She had intended to inform them this morning but she couldn't find her lab test results from under the computer keyboard where she had kept it three days earlier. She hoped Muto was back from her listless roving to tell her if she had removed the booklet and where she had kept it. With Uncle Lobe's obnoxious arrogance and excessive rudeness, she was close to the edge of the cliff of

patience and was finally ready to fight back. One could only be pushed so far. She couldn't withstand his cruel and patronizing attitude forever. She might have made one or two mistakes in her life. But to her, that was part of the lessons in life's curricula. Her mistakes gave Lobe no right to treat her like a stupid child. She was twenty-two – old enough to determine with whom she wanted to build her life!

It wasn't hard to visualize the reactions of Uncle Lobe and his wife but Sirri's head was too full now to overburden it with the images of angry or piteous eyes scanning her over from toenails to her plaited hair. At worse her uncle would only have to throw aside his arrogance and accept her pregnancy like a boil in his ear. She hoped he would swallow the news with grace; after all, she wasn't the first in the world and wouldn't be the last to get pregnant shortly after leaving the university.

Before now Atam Sirri had been a mover, self-groomed against the gloomy deceptions inherent in group pursuit of what Granny distastefully termed rotten values – becoming what everyone else wants to become at all cost regardless of the loss of moral rectitude and internal peace. Uncle Lobe Mapito, her mother's younger brother, took her from her parents at the age of nine. That was a month after she had passed her common entrance exams that left Papa Atam and Mama Sophie deeply worried about how she would continue her education. There was no secondary school in Mukunda. And Mukunda was one of those villages where it was common for mothers whose children barely caught the First School Leaving Certificate by the tip of the tail to proudly proclaim in the market or other communal gathering, with a warm air of supremacy, that their son or daughter had 'completed school' as though he had reached the most acceptable apex of academic achievement. Those were some of the proclamations Mama Sophie Atam abhorred and prayed aloud every evening during their family's night devotion before going to bed that such a fate shouldn't befall

her daughter. Pa Nfon Atam and his wife had flowery dreams for their only daughter and they always shared their dreams with her.

'You must become a medical doctor,' Pa Atam used to say like most of the dreaming farmers of his age. 'You will build your hospital on that piece of land where those four kola nut trees are standing. Then people will learn from us that educating a girl child is not a waste of time and money.'

When Uncle Lobe drove down the dusty quarter of Bonamikenge in his white Toyota Hilux that Saturday morning to take Sirri to Njopongo, it was a festival of tears in Atams' compound – tears of joy and hope and thanksgiving to God for heeding to their prayers.

While her parents bade her farewell, Sirri had taken a silent solemn vow. She would study hard and pass all her exams and graduate and get a good job and come back home one day in her own car. She would pull down that old plank shack and erect a solid brick house with five rooms, a garage and a more spacious living room and veranda.

That was ten long years before, when the road of her life was still stretched clean and straight ahead of her. That was in those days when Lobe still clawed around for materials to build his paradise, blind to everything else going on around him.

From the moment Lobe hit the top and started having interest in what went on down there around his feet, family quarrels sprouted like grass after the first rains of March. The misunderstanding between Sirri and her uncle started when Uncle Lobe urged her to study law, promising to sweep away all obstacles to her ascend onto a comfortable position in the Supreme Court.

'I have solid connections,' he had said expansively, arms spread on his office chair's armrests when Sirri happily came to announce her success in the A' Level examination. 'I have many people who owe me a little consideration – people who will do anything I want them to do – anything. And pushing

you up the ladder of fame in this country is the least I can request from some of them.'

Sirri had noticed the full glass of wine and the empty bottle sitting on his desk. From his darting eyes and stinking breathe, Sirri had concluded that he was drunk. To save him time to snooze, Sirri had accepted every of his proposals. She left his office and went ahead with her own plans. She wanted to become a journalist and there was nothing to stop her.

That was her calling, Granny would say.

Uncle Lobe was stiff with rage when four weeks later, Sirri showed him her admission letter with Journalism and Mass Communication as her major. After a spontaneous outburst of anger in which he described how ungrateful and inconsiderate Sirri was to him and his wife after she had been scooped from the rubbles of Mukunda to the Lobes' paradise of wealth and affluence and style, Lobe told her he would get the university authorities to change her admission letter. Sirri tried to talk him into understanding her motivation but Lobe wouldn't listen. Remembering another of Granny's adage that the pillow was the perfect mediator in a loving couple's crisis, Sirri solicited Auntie Belame's intervention in convincing her husband to let her follow her heart's desire.

Auntie Belame talked to her husband. Lobe sulkily submitted. But the harm was already done. From then, Lobe became the gifted artist, perfect in conjuring up images of Sirri as the rotten toenail in the family's athletic foot. And as time passed the image took various forms, often for the worse, depending on Lobe's temperament.

However, despite their misunderstanding, Lobe periodically admitted that she was a brilliant woman. After going through her first two transcripts of results, Lobe vowed to do all within his power to support her all the way to becoming a great woman. Whenever he had a few more glasses of wine, he never failed to add that becoming a journalist was wasting her potentials and advantages.

'As a journalist, you spend your whole life holding the ladder for others to climb to fame and self-accomplishment, farting in your beautiful mouth as they ascend,' he would say, twisting his meaty face in a grimace of regret. 'And after you've gotten them up there on the top, you become a useless piece of furniture good only for firewood.'

Sirri had not bugged from her chosen carrier – a journalist she would become. That was final.

Then one evening, a week before the commencement of her last semester exams, she met Sadi on her way down to Njopongo for an early weekend, fell in love almost immediately with the bus driver. The following weekend she didn't come down to Njopongo as she did on all weekends. Sadi visited her in Molyko. Before long it became almost impossible for a week to go by without them seeing each other. During one of her surprise visits to Sirri's room, Muto Confidence, Lobe's youngest daughter, met Sadi fully installed for the night. Muto suspected what was going on between Sirri and Sadi. She cut her visit short, returned to Njopongo that same Friday night to tell her father what she had seen, embellishing her story with her own imaginations of what might have been happening for ages before now between the two and what would happen if her father didn't stamp his feet on the ground. Lobe drove to Molyko the next morning, gave Sirri a loud tongue-lashing in front of her hostel with her neighbours peeping from their balconies.

Sirri was declared a misfit in Lobe's paradise. She became the ungrateful niece who had chosen to bear a cone of palm nut on her bare head by falling in love with a wretched bus driver. Her mother wept when Lobe drove his new Lexus Jeep to Mukunda a week later with the sole mission of painting more images of Sirri with Sadi's superimposing caricature. Pa Atam said nothing while Lobe was still around. But as soon as Lobe left, Pa Atam beat his chest and bemoaned how all work and no play had turned his daughter into a vulnerable woman.

After informing her uncle this evening and talking to Granny afterwards, Sirri's next stop would be in Mukunda. It was important that she convinced her parents that she wasn't as vulnerable as her uncle had made them to believe. She was going to make them see what a wonderful husband and trustful son-in-law Sadi would be to them. She had to make them see that getting pregnant wasn't a dead end but most certainly the opening of another door for better things to come.

It was Tuesday, three-thirty-five by her mobile phone's clock. Sirri crossed the dusty main road quickly as she saw the old lorry that delivered flour to the bakery down the road head towards her with the ancient engine grunting tiredly and the exhaust pipe puffing out black cloud of smoke. She frowned at the thought of getting enveloped in the dust and smoke that swelled around in its wake. Her plaited hair was only two days old. She had forgotten to cover it with a scarf before leaving the house. It was so annoying how fast the roads got dry and so dusty a few hours after a heavy downpour. The sun quickly baked the earth into blankets of fine dust, tossing it out in brown clouds upon the slightest disturbance by the wind or vehicle. This global warming phenomenon was quite an enormous threat! It was only October but the heat was so fierce that it seemed to grip the air and hold it still. She could hear tree barks cracking from the drought.

Sirri was, however, grateful to whatever chemistry that went on in her body. Despite all the heat the sun dumped on the earth, none of it seemed to get to her. She was feeling unusually cold these days. Even when the sun was overhead as it was this afternoon with the sky void of clouds to hold back some of the angry sunrays, she still shivered with a terrible internal cold. Over a week now, she was putting on a pullover and staying in her bed for as long as she could do so without rousing suspicion. She would have been in bed at this moment if not for her need for airtime credit. She had to talk

to Sadi first through his neighbour's phone but her phone had barely ten francs in it, not enough to place a call-me-back. So she had gone down the road to the girl operating a callbox beside the chemist to transfer some airtime credit into her mobile phone.

Sirri hurried past Spido's Site, the snack bar restaurant where the soldiers guarding the airport often came for drinks. She took the narrow street, the only paved lane that ended exactly at the gate to her uncle's house. Uncle Lobe was around for a late lunch. His ash-coloured Infinity was proudly hugging the driveway with Esingi dozing behind the wheels. She was certain her uncle wouldn't be in for long. He would surely be leaving again soon, probably to return in two days or more.

Always travelling!

Sirri, hanging on to another of Granny's marble-engraved tenets, never ceased praying that God shouldn't saddle her with such a man like Lobe for a life partner. She couldn't imagine a family life with a husband who was never there.

She shuddered as she opened the small gate to the porch. She felt her vision grow suddenly faint as she made it up the six steps to the oak door leading to the living room. She stopped and leaned on the immaculate white wall to regain her composure.

She could hear her uncle's voice barking instructions at someone. He must be on his Blackberry cell phone. After a minute or so of stillness, she felt better and walked into the living room. She was right. Lord Mayor Lobe was on his Blackberry when she swaggered in.

'Good afternoon,' she greeted and began heading towards the corridor when her uncle waved her back with his free hand. She turned around and noticed Muto perching on a stool in front of the home cinema set. Muto had her mother's beautifully shaped legs which she now crossed at the ankles and pursed her rose-painted lips. She had used her mother's lipstick. The look of mischief in her eyes brought a sharp

alertness into Sirri's bearing. There was something in the air. Once again, the cockroach had to take the defence stand and justify her presence in the hen's market before being devoured.

Sirri stood rooted in the middle of the vast room that could have served as an adequate religious worship ground for a hundred worshippers. She waited while Lobe talked and talked in his cell phone. While she waited, she stared at the gold-framed wedding picture sitting inside the huge glass wall cupboard. In it, Lobe was grinning expansively like a victorious athlete beside a gold trophy while beside him Auntie Belame's young face hung sideways and her eyes harboured a grey hint of sadness. Her full lips were drawn inward and she looked like someone wary of where the next ride would take her to.

'What is this?'

Sirri startled. Lobe was holding the yellow booklet containing the results of her laboratory tests and the doctor's diagnosis.

'What is this?' he repeated, pocketing his phone as though getting ready for a tussle.

Sirri looked at a spot on the wall, slightly above her uncle's head, where the paint had peeled off. She could bet that Lobe hadn't seen that nasty spot otherwise he would have ordered the repainting of the entire room.

'What is this?' Lobe asked, this time louder.

The question brought her back to the interrogation.

'My lab test result,' she murmured. She thought she heard Muto giggle or swear.

'What does it say?'

Sirri didn't respond.

'That you are two months pregnant! Have you seen what happens to stubborn flies like you? Girls who walk with their brains between their legs?'

Sirri couldn't find the words to answer to this. Her heart was threatening to burst through her ribs. Her eyes began to spin in her head again.

Please, not now, she told herself. She must hold herself upright.

'With whom did you create this?' Lobe held out the booklet open.

Sirri's gaze dropped to her uncle's smooth jaws. She was puzzled by the tone in which he asked the question. He sounded as though he was asking a dog from where it got the rotten carcass of a lizard.

'Have you suddenly lost your tongue?' Lobe asked, clenching and unclenching his left fist and scolding at her. 'Maybe I should take it that like all wayward children with no proper sense of purpose, you prefer to nail your mouth like a crocodile and give birth to a bastard. Who is the father?' he shouted, his voice ricocheting on the surrounding high walls.

'It is that driver.' It was Muto who shouted in a voice charged with disgust. She looked enraged for a reason Sirri couldn't figure out.

'You shut up there!' Lobe barked at his fourteen-year-old daughter. 'No one asked you a thing.' Then he turned to Sirri.

'Who did this?'

'She told you. Sadi is the father,' Sirri said and shifted her eyes to the bridge of Lobe's nose. She thought she heard Muto curse.

'At last you ended up riding all the way with that . . .' Lobe paused to think of a suitable word to describe Sadi. Then he noticed his wife.

Auntie Belame had come in from the kitchen and was standing on the doorway to the corridor, gripping the lacey blinds tight and twisting the fine cloth around her fingers.

'What is the matter Mapi?' she asked her husband, her eyes revealing her tiredness of witnessing family brawls.

'Sirri is pregnant!' Lobe said and threw his arms resignedly. 'And for who? That scum from the abandoned caves of the earth – a wretched driver, a nobody, a – '

'Sadi is none of what you ignorantly think he is,' Sirri shot back between her teeth, feeling her whole body shiver with the force of her angry words. 'He may not be rich in your *eyes of things* but he is honest.'

'Oh, I see! A driver, honest!' Lobe was grinning evilly now.

'Yes – a lot better than your ideas of an ideal man for a woman.' Sirri couldn't feel she stood on her bones as she blurted this out. She seemed to be floating, enveloped in a thick grey cloud. She held her head in both hands to keep the encroaching blurriness away.

'Did you hear that?' Lobe asked, gaping at his wife, his eyes wide in bewilderment 'Did you hear her? Can you see what waywardness does to a child's sense of respect? A child I have loved and cared for from when she was still a small rat.'

Then he turned to Sirri. 'You still have any self-pride left in you to speak back at me?'

'I have done nothing that warrants me to lose my self-pride, Uncle.' Sirri's heart was already hammering so hard against her breast that she bent over slightly in order to stay on her feet. She was twenty-two for goodness's sake, pregnant or not, with a Bachelor of Science in her handbag!

'Did you hear that, Bela?' Lobe cried out. 'An ungrateful child self-transformed into a woe that goes around spreading her legs for a skunk –'

Calling her a woe was too huge and thorny to swallow, especially knowing the amount of pretence that characterized the Lobe's family life. Sirri gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, tilted her head slightly to the left as if listening to a gossiping mouth over her shoulders, and clenched her fists before firing back. 'I might be a woe for all the world has to say!' she said. 'You should ask yourself what that same world says about

you. A wealth-blinded, arrogant, valiant, pig-headed tyrant who closes his eyes to avoid seeing his own house collapsing on his head.'

This said, she opened her eyes and glared purposely at Muto who was gapping with shock from her corner with her mother's lipstick glittering on her lips.

'I have had enough of this vicious manhandling and perpetual praise singing!' Sirri said in a hiss and breathed out hard. 'I am old enough to choose my path in life. I am old enough to choose my friends. I love Sadi. That is why I am going to have his child!' She took two strides, grabbed the booklet from her stunned uncle's hand and fled up the stairs to her room.

Thirty minutes latter, she came back downstairs, dragging her valise behind her. Lobe had left. Auntie Belame was weeping in her room. Muto was buried in a videogame.

There was nobody to stop Sirri or talk her from leaving.

*

This is another puzzle I will like to unravel one day as I grow older – the twisting power of the clutches of love. You can be enormously rich in the material sense of the word, be powerful and greatly feared, but when that four letter word grips your ankle, you trip like a sick cow. When my husband and I decide to roughen our feathers a bit and he chooses that most effective weapon of his – to sleep in the stranger's room or in the sofa in the living room – I ask myself if he still has it in his head that I am a Divisional Officer. Fortunately, I have learnt to separate professional life from domestic life, something every person who intends to keep a happy home must learn to do. I have also memorized the words 'I am sorry' and I use it passionately, like the perfume in my handbag lying somewhere in my office two doors away.

With younger people during those early seconds after colliding with that four-letter word, it is a tricky business. I can imagine the rage that ate the mayor when Sirri spat those nasty words in his face. Somehow, he deserved them. You don't call your niece or anyone from whom you expect some respect, a woe. That was pushing his authority too far.

'If you had known what had happened to Sadi that day, do you think you would have behaved the same? I mean with your uncle that afternoon.' I ask.

'We all have our dignity,' she says. 'I have swallowed enough of it. I couldn't continue. You are a woman too. What would you have done if you were in my place?'

I am not in her place. And it is very unlikely that I will pass that road again at any point in time. I must admit that I do fall in love all over again each time my husband visited after we have been separated for days or weeks. This is a different kind of falling. I call it re-loving which might mean renewing our love or merely adding more elements of excitement to what already exist.

I look at her again – a young beautiful woman with skin the colour of this polished, dark-brown iroko table that Adamou is now desecrating with lines from his pen. I can see that she has lost most of her ferrous nature. What I don't know is what troubled her most; the rejection by her uncle or her boyfriend's unfortunate fate?

'When you called yesterday and introduced yourself, I asked myself why you didn't get your uncle to intervene. I didn't understand why you came to me.'

'It is because I knew you will do it,' she replies and smoothes the front of her dark green blouse by pulling down the edge with both hands. 'Shaddy found me at Granny's place and told us Sadi has been locked up. On Granny's advice I went to see Sadi's father who told me he has talked with you.'

'You went to Njok!' Sadi muttered in awe and shock.

She doesn't answer. She stares at the table with a faraway look in her dark eyes. She looks sorrowfully lovely.

Sadi groans and shakes his head.

'Oh God, why me?' I don't think he intended us to hear this hoarse lamentation that escapes many broken hearts. He clasps his head with both hands, shaking it slowly.

Remorse was beginning to take hold of him.

'Thinking about your bus?' I ask Sadi as if I don't know he had had a fight with Sirri which is now making him feel as to hide his head under the table. 'Can you tell me what happened? How did the accident come about?'

The accident is that bat that frightened the cat that knocked down the candle that ignited the newspaper that spread the flame to the curtain that burnt the neighbours shop . . .

'I have heard several versions of what happened that evening. But I will like to hear from you, Mr. Sadi,' I urge.

He stares at me for a split second and then looks out the window. After a long moment of quietude during which he appears to be recollecting his thoughts, he coughs and sits upright.

'We always sit for a long time at the motor park waiting for passengers,' Sadi says slowly and scratches his head like his anxious father did in my office the other day.

I pick up my notepad. I might need to ask some questions later. Better take my own notes instead of depending on Adamou's scribble.

3

Sadi usually sat for hours on a bench with a broken leg placed against the wall behind the ticket counter at Gare Routier Bonaberi praying for one more passenger to come. At times he stretched himself on the bench and slept. Whenever he felt sufficiently bored he joined the rest of the loaders and anxious drivers to scream destinations at prospective travellers.

'South West, Missaka, Limbe, Njopongo, Kumba, Muyuka,' they chorused discordantly.

Most often, when the counted stumps of the ticket booklet showed that sufficient tickets had been sold out, his bus was full and he could at last make a trip, Sadi still had to conduct a quick search in the nearby beer parlours for those passengers already trapped in bottles of beer, apparently oblivious of their pending journey. And such passengers plucked off bottles are usually the real noisy and trouble-thirsty ones who grab the least chance to spring up a quarrel and insult anyone who hasn't the gift of tolerance. They will talk and shout and even threaten to trade blows all the way to their destinations. When these types, for any reason, decided that they didn't like the driver's face, Sadi turned to his CD player for help. He increased the volume to drown the noise they made. This, however, worked only when the trouble-monger was sitting far behind in his fumes of alcohol or when there happened to be someone else to absorb their wrath. Unfortunately, from when his CD player got stolen in a carwash point, Sadi could no longer use this tactic. These days, he had to hunch his back and encase the verbal assaults. He resorted to retreating into his sack of jumbled thoughts, tossing all his problems around, formulating and discarding possible solutions like a child playing with the disassembled parts of a toy lion.

This Tuesday afternoon he was lucky. After Azania showed up beside his bus, Sadi waited only for forty more minutes for his bus to be full and the luggage secured on the carriage with rubber bands.

He stood by the window and began counting the passengers and asking them to reconfirm their destinations. This was necessary to ensure that he was transporting the right passengers and to avoid being cheated by the loaders. When he was still new in this business and didn't know the rules, he paid his *newman tax* with grace. On one occasion, the park clerk in charge of Sadi's bus had informed him at the end of the loading that his bus was composed of six Njopongo passengers, two along-the-road and two Buea and gave him six thousand eight hundred francs in total after deducting park charges. Sadi only discovered later on at Njopongo roundabout that eight out of the ten passengers were travelling to Buea and had paid the full fare of a thousand and three hundred francs each.

Clement Azania, the king of *Wasa Matanda* (Below the Mangroves) and lord of the nation's mind from a quarter past seven to eight on Thursdays and Saturdays nights, and Mbenga Matindi Jonathan's best friend and classmate, hopped into the seat close to the driver's. Clement Azania was the satirist and presenter of *Wasa Matanda* on KTV – the most popular social documentary in the country with its images of the most remote and shamefully hidden scenes of civil sagas.

Aza's program was Sirri's favourite and Azania himself was her idol, her dream mentor. She did her internship at KTV during her second year second semester holidays in preparation for her final thesis but didn't have the opportunity to work under him. She often told Sadi that she considered Azania a miracle and she nursed the hope of working with him one day.

'At last we are travelling, young Mbenga,' Azania said as a form of greeting. 'What a torment. Almost an hour of waiting.'

'We have no choice,' Sadi said as he pocketed the money the clerk had handed to him and took his seat behind the wheels. 'We are used to waiting.'

Azania nodded in agreement.

As Sadi drove slowly towards the park gate, he noticed that Azania wasn't wearing his cone-shaped artificial beard as he did on TV. Very few people would recognize him now in his clean-shaved chin and hairless head glistering from the applied ointment. Sadi had met Azania for the first time at his father's house last December when old Mbenga finally gave in and agreed to grant an interview on his life as a fisherman to his former classmate. Azania had followed him to the swamp where Mbenga pitched his nets. They inspected the tortoise hooks and baskets together with Sadi filming using a video camera Azania had brought with him. Azania returned to Douala two days after, feeling happy and well rested though a bit disappointed as Mbenga categorically refused to talk about his life as, in Azania's words, *a song conceiver* (he couldn't be called a song writer because he never documented any of the songs he composed).

Azania and Sadi's father had schooled in Catholic School Moquo in those days when there was just a narrow footpath from the Njopongo-Douala highway through Bonamikenge and down to the west bank of the Mongo River. While Mbenga branched into fishing and river-singing after Standard four, Azania went on to become a primary school teacher and later on a headmaster until his retirement four years ago. When his younger brother returned home from the UK and set up KTV, a retired Azania saw an opportunity to let out the hidden talent in him. He conceived and ran *Wasa Matanda*.

'Going to Moquo to see the family?' Sadi asked Azania as he handed the bordereau for stamping to the man standing outside a small building at the entrance to the motor park.

'No, Njopongo,' Azania said, pushing up his spectacles from the tip of his nose. 'Kevin's wife is coming out of hospital today.'

'Ohoo! I have totally forgotten. He told me about it.' Mbodi Kevin had told Sadi three days before that his wife had given birth to a baby girl and that mother and baby would be leaving the hospital on Tuesday. It had completely escaped Sadi's mind that Tuesday was already here.

'So you know Kevin?' Azania said.

'Who in Njopongo doesn't know him?' Sadi asked in return. Mbodi was known as the nosiest *okadaman*. Wherever Mbodi was engaged in a debate or story telling in one of the junctions where motorcycle riders waited for passengers, he pulled a crowd of eager listeners and participators around him.

'My wife couldn't come,' Azania explained. 'Her heart has started again. She is very depressed about not being able to carry her namesake from the hospital.'

'It is good that you will be there,' Sadi said and stepped on the accelerator, watching out for those wild-speeding *cargoes* before nosing into the main road. 'A very long night of drinking and dancing. Maybe you will pick up something for your show.'

Azania laughed.

'I wouldn't like that. I don't want anything to spoil my evening.'

It dawned on Sadi just then that Mbodi's baby was Azania's first grandchild.

'I should be congratulating you for being a happy grandfather,' he said warmly.

'Thank you. Of course, I am happy to have a grandchild by that headstrong Kevin. Hardly anyone took him and that girl seriously when they started that business of theirs. I have

even had to argue with Jonathan over the decency of what my son was doing with another man's daughter. Jonathan advised me to keep my nose out of the smoke of youth. How I hope Jonathan can be there this night. How is he? I mean your father.'

'Hmmnn!' Sadi murmured. 'He was at my place. He left this morning.' He stared briefly at the rolling houses beyond the narrow, dirt-filled gutter as the bus danced around from one chain of potholes to another.

'Back to his fishing,' Azania remarked and shook his head. 'Old Mbenga needs some rest. You ought to make him try to rest once in a while. He overworks himself for nothing.'

'I won't remind him again,' Sadi said with a mild frown. 'He has decided to understand every other word except rest.'

'Your father is quite a character. But you have to try. He is the type who walks straight down the river if the bridge is displaced.' Azania laughed. 'What a determined grey-head!'

After a short moment of silence, Azania glanced at Sadi and said 'The last time we met he didn't seem pleased that you are still glued to the steering.'

Sadi gasped. So these two have been talking about his bus-driving?

'Well, yes, I . . .' Sadi swallowed. 'He thinks I should quit and come back home.'

Azania pushed out his lower lip and shrugged his shoulders.

'Not a bad idea if you ask me. At our age, we do feel very lonely most of the time. We usually need our own people around us – I mean someone we can trust. As for you, I believe there always comes a time like this in the life of every young man to take the hard decision. He has to do so even when he doesn't know where it will lead him to. In my wildest dreams I never dreamt of being known by a crowd bigger than the batches of pupils I have taught in my lifetime. My pupils were my universe. But look at me today.'

'Don't you present today?' Sadi asked, intending to sway the subject from himself. Then he recalled that *Matanda* was broadcast on Thursdays and Saturdays. 'Ah, yesterday was too charged that it seemed to have lasted a whole week.'

'It happens, especially when you are too carried away with work.' After a pause he asked. 'What do you plan to do with the bus – well if you one day decide to follow Jonathans lead? Sell it or give it to someone?'

Sadi shook his head. 'I have not yet decided.'

'If you decide to sell, please let me know. We can arrange to have Mbodi have it. He can do better with a bus than he is doing with that motorcycle.'

Sadi churned this in his mind. The relationship between Mbodi and his father had neither been strenuous nor easy. Like most fathers in those days, Mbenga Matindi inclusive, Azania too had not been left out of the sweet aroma of the dream of raising a son to become a medical doctor or a pilot. Unlike Matindi and the others like him, Azania's dream was strangled early when seven-year-old Mbodi Kevin Azania revealed his grand aspiration of becoming a train conductor. From what Sadi heard Mbenga narrate to another friend at the time, Azania had not plucked off his feathers in rage. Azania might have seen it merely as a child's uninformed fantasy worth ignoring. Or he might have recognized the root of the issue and chose to look it in the eye. The second option proved to be the one Azania had adopted in those days. He was quick to see that there wasn't a clear link between his dreams and Mbodi's aspiration so he decided to be extra-observant. He began to watch his son much more closely. He stood in a discrete corner and watched Mbodi build toy cars with cartons and barbwires illegally harvested from the fence in Evina's abandoned plot. He watched young Mbodi equip his cars with tiny bulbs powered by discarded torchlight batteries.

Azania was disappointed but not surprised when, after obtaining his First School Leaving Certificate, Mbodi told

him he wanted to become a mechanic. What else could Azania do but shrug and tell his son, 'If that is what you want, so be it.' He had gone straightaway to seek admission for Mbodi into GTHS Ombe where young Mbodi studied Mechanical Engineering and left four years later with his CAP in his pocket. What held them together was the thin but solid bond of mutual respect, secret admiration and sacred wishes for the other's success.

Then like most childhood fantasies transported in the clipped wings of worldly ignorance, the walls of Mbodi's monumental reverie quickly began to flake off as he discovered the great power of money in the world into which he had suddenly been born. This time, the new wings that transported him were adorned with shiny pieces of the silver that represented absolute happiness to many rather than a means to a fulfilled life.

If Azania thought now that his son would do better as a bus driver, just as Mbenga Matindi thought Sadi would be better off as a poultry farmer, so be it.

'I will let you know when the time comes,' Sadi said to Azania now as he stepped lightly on the brakes to go over a speed-bump.

Azania nodded and relapsed into punching the many keys on what was either a cell phone or a walkie-talkie or another form of triangular communication device equipped with three peeping lenses on its three sides and a short antenna.

With Azania out of Sadi's mind now, he noticed that this batch of passengers was exceptionally quiet except for one fair lady with two gold rings on her nose whose cell phone rang approximately every four minutes. Apart from her numerous merry calls, the ride was relatively quiet. The vehicle seemed to be in workable order today after the routine maintenance work Sadi did on the engine the day before. Everything about his vehicle was old. The parts rattled and squeaked in weary protestation. He had long replaced the back windshield with an opaque nylon sheet and

he couldn't ascertain when he would ever afford a new windshield again. Times were hard. The thought of his finances always made him shudder. He had barely the minimum fifty thousand francs required to keep his bank account open. He was immersed in debts right to the ears. Maybe selling the bus would enable him clear his debts and still have some leftover. The main trouble was the fear of the unknown as his father called it. What if he invested the rest in the poultry farm and ended up with dead birds like the last time? On what would he fall back?

The tire leak was mercifully gradual. Sadi started sensing it on the wheels as they approached Bekoko under the flyover to the Western and Northwest Regions. By the time they got to Miondo Bar, the tire was flat and scrapping like a sack of stones against the tarred road. It was but normal for the tire to leak. He had bought it probably fifth-hand four months earlier and he considered himself lucky that the bald thing hadn't exploded under him long before now.

'What is that?' Azania inquired, looking up from his gadget. 'Flat tire?'

Sadi nodded. He couldn't drive any further. The bus seemed to be rolling by the wheel drum. He had to stop and change the tire. The spare in the boot was equally bald from use, but he had no choice. He switched on the double trafficator as he approached the police control post. The policeman with a shiny silver whistle in his mouth didn't waste his breath in whistling him down as he glanced without interest at the bus wobbling off the road. Sadi swerved to the curb and switched off the engine.

'Na wetin Driver?' a passenger from the back seat asked in a voice full of alarm. He must have been kicked violently off a passionate dream.

'Rotten tire,' someone replied and sighed, 'Rotten motor!'

Thank you, Sadi thought and removed the key from the ignition.

A few more voices grunted their irritation.

'Please, get down everyone,' Sadi said, undid his seatbelt and jumped out.

'That is how they are,' a woman's voice complained. 'What others throw, they pick and put in motors to kill people.'

'Madam, you di block passage,' somebody warned. 'Push your waist for corner.'

'Yes, na dem dis,' the woman yelled at the man asking her to shift her waist. 'No respect for diya mothers. He says I push my waist for corner. Come take the waist and shift. Waist ya mama.'

'Don't maiin'am Madam, just shift the waist make we jump out,' someone said pleasantly.

Sadi noticed that Azania was already standing on the curb, engrossed in his electronic gadget, turning the instrument around as though gauging various angles.

This was Columbus' shift. The tall and pot-belly gendarme officer had mounted a solid blockade with tires and old drums and thick logs of wood. Sadi knew every gendarme and policeman by name, old and new, who collected money along the Njopongo-Douala highway, yet most of the time they pretended not to know him. It was an effective strategy adopted against supplication. He spotted Columbus holding an L-shaped iron bar with long spikes on the lower section. Columbus was smoking a cigarette as usual and keenly watching down the road towards Njopongo with a mighty frown on his face. Columbus was always sour-tempered. There was no way any car doing public transport could possibly pass his territory without the driver bleeding something into the hands of Columbus' colleague who kept the treasury. Unless, of course, Columbus chose to let them go.

There seems to have been a mutual understanding between policemen and operators of public transport vehicle that no transport vehicle has regular documents or is technically fit for the road. If all car documents are in legal

order, the time wasted by the driver in getting out of their vehicle to present these documents to one of Columbus' colleagues sitting in a shade several meters from the road is sufficient motive to impound his vehicle for hours. The police are never short of motives to put a driver at fault. It is therefore useless counting on the regularity of one's car papers or what the law says regarding the circumstances under which a vehicle can be impounded. Just place a five hundred or a thousand francs note between the pages of the car document folder and pass it on to Columbus and his colleagues and you will do your trips in peace. They even went as low as accepting winning beer corks as laissez-passer. Well, you will be okay until the guys are replaced with another fresh and hungry gang. As for passengers without National ID cards, the rule is similar. They inform the driver of their status beforehand and hand him a thousand francs to "settle" control when the time comes. This prevents the wastes of time and calms a steam-hearted Columbus.

While Sadi struggled with the old door that refused to lock, he counted four buses, two trucks loaded with *eru* and two Toyota Corollas lined on both sides of the road. Columbus and his men didn't care about the dangerous congestion they created along a major highway. What interested them was the bottom-line: how much money they would take back to horse-racing kiosks, beer parlours and roasted meat and fish and mistresses at the end of the day.

From the folders in their hands, it was easy to recognize the drivers standing around a policeman sitting on a bench made of Indian bamboo inside a small shade roofed with thatch. That was the treasurer and bargaining officer of Columbus' Enterprise, as the drivers called it. Another policeman holding a notebook and a pen was standing close by. His job was to record the number on the number plate of each car that had been "controlled". This was to ensure that the police weren't cheated by drivers who might claim they had passed by and paid their dues. The trucks transporting

eru, by virtue of their transporting export cargo, have special fees to pay that ranged between ten and thirty thousands. The amount is actually arrived at after a hearty bargain. There are several instances when the driver and the police arrive at an equilibrium price and the policeman who did the negotiation consults his treasurer after receiving a five or ten thousand note to get change to reimburse the driver.

It is a well established, generally recognized and conveniently accepted marketplace without properly defined merchandise. What is essential is that both parties seem to be at ease with the rules of the game. Only the passengers stubbornly refuse to understand and accept the operation for what it is. They will insult the market operators and chant those irritating, worn out and shredded choruses of how corruption eats into the fabrics of economic prosperity hence retarding national growth.

All the passengers had left Sadi's bus. Some were standing nearby waiting for the tire to be fixed. Sadi saw two men take a few steps into the low bush nearby and pull down their trouser zips. Peeing was indeed contagious, Sadi thought as he saw a woman scurry behind a house, raising her skirt as she ran. What relieve the tire leak must have brought to these people.

'You never get new tires,' the lady with the ringed nose said all of a sudden. Sadi turned and couldn't help staring. She was tightly clad in blue jean trousers that accentuated her beefy hips. She wore long Rasta plaits that fell on her bare shoulders. And her brassiere pushed her bulging breasts close to her chin. Her blouse was a flimsy piece of yellow cloth held in place by one stripe hooked on her left shoulder. Sadi marvelled at how she got that gold ring in her navel.

'I am in a hurry,' the woman said, twisting her lips in what should be a sign of her impatience. She glanced at her silver wristwatch. 'Now I have to stand under this sun . . .'

Sadi looked at the sky. The sun couldn't be seen. The cloud was grey in most parts with patches of faint blue. He

could describe the weather as mild with prospects of rain before the next dawn.

He heard the lady's cell phone ring again somewhere in the bulging green handbag clasped under her arm. This time it was a soft Christmas carol ring tone. It took her quite some time to rummage down to where the small black phone lay.

Sadi shrugged her away from his sight and mind as he removed the spare tire from the back boot, pulled out his jack and spanners and got down to his knees.

'Can I help?' A young man in a brown T-shirt with the caption VOICE FROM BEYOND written in bold pink letters asked as Sadi fell on his knees to fit the jack.

'Thanks,' Sadi said. 'Get me some stones and wedge the two front tires. You know where to fit them . . .'

'I am a taximan Grand, a mechanic,' the young man said and moved closer. 'My patron took back his taxi last week. I want to go and breathe some fresh air for a while.'

Sadi nodded. He understood. He knew the hardship one was exposed to in especially in the city of Douala after one's source of income had been pulled from under him. The young man was running away from having to make the choice between possible starvation and the temptation of becoming a circumstantial thief. He was returning to where there were still some fragments of communal living – where one didn't need several thousand francs to go through a day. He was running to a place where women still called passersby and offered them food to eat and water to drink – a place where a neighbour considered it his duty to knock and even broke your door if remained locked at seven in the morning.

'You get the wedge,' the young man said, 'I will do the tire.'

Sadi thankfully backed away. Most of the passengers had dispersed. He saw one across the road, pointing at the bundles of *miondo* sitting on a piece of plank placed on the mouth of an old rusty drum. The man was talking to the *miondo* vendor, a barefooted child dressed in navy-blue khaki

shorts and nothing else on top. Sadi made a mental note to buy two bundles after replacing the tire. He wondered what other source of living, apart from selling *miondo,* was available to the inhabitants of this small roadside village. A bundle of twenty was sold at two hundred and fifty and he could see only four bundles on that plank. The state of their houses shyly reflected their inadequacies. This house in particular, the one in front of which the *miondo* was displayed, had stones and cocoanut branches on the roof to hold down broken rusty aluminium sheets from being blown off by the wind. The rotten planks on the wall had been replaced in places or reinforced with black plastic papers and thatch. A dirty piece of cloth, possibly a part of a deceased grandmother's discarded *kaba* was draped over the window facing the road as though to mystically wade off burglars. From the open door facing the highway, Sadi could see a chair with a broken leg leaning on the wall under a broad wall calendar that Sadi could bet was hiding a huge hole on the wall separating the living-room from the bedroom.

Men live by hope – the sure fuel that keeps them going. Hope that tomorrow will solidify today's plans and dreams of a better life. But in most villages around the sub-division that Sadi had travelled to, he had never stopped wondering what it is that the populace places their hope for tomorrow on? In the morning they get up from sleep looking tired, sad and hungry to face a fierce day. In the evening, especially on the eve of a market day, you see them, looking malnourished, dirty and fatigued, dragging themselves along farm roads like zombies with mighty bags of coco yams or cassava or huge bunches of plantains or a neck-breaking combination of all of these on their heads or strapped on their backs. The older ones, mighty luggage on their heads too, hold walking staffs to keep them on their feet. Most often there are the younger ones of tender ages, trudging along with the load threatening to squeeze their neck into their chest. These young ones have deep furrows of tears running down their cheeks to their bare

chest, and mucous bobbling back and forth in their sniffing noses as they hold on, slowly eating up the distance between farm and home with their short, forced and heavy steps.

The lucky, prosperous farmers have two-wheeled trucks in front of them against which they apply the last fibres of their frail muscles to move their harvest home. These farmers generally get home shortly before nightfall to cook and bathe and sleep and dream of yet another tomorrow of similar routine. The only tomorrow that comes with some rest to their bodies is market day. At least on market days they have a short distance to cover to convey their products to a den where tax-collectors, a refined version of those in the biblical days, wait with tickets for every meagre good that enters the muddy or dusty enclosure for sale. The people pay their taxes with inaudible bleats like sheep whose lambs are plucked from their teats by the shepherd for sale. Whatever proceeds left after the tax-lions must have devoured their fat share is completely spent in buying smoked crayfish, salt, rice and a few other provisions that might hopefully keep them alive to the next market day. Very little or nothing is kept aside for education or health needs so that when they fall sick, as it is bound to be the case every now and then, their only hope lies in the herbs that grow on the roads to their farms.

Sadi shuddered. That is how the society has been programmed: a huge lot must labour for the comfort of a few. 'We forget that besides being tax collectors, we are husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children, neighbours, friends . . . and even enemies of those from whom we extort for our personal gains.'

A high pitch charming laughter cut Sadi from his reflections. The lady with the ring on the navel was having a good time across the road. She was standing with one of the policemen laughing and tossing her hair about teasingly. The ancient tricks of enticement were at her service for flaunting as she wished. Sadi saw the policeman bring out his cell phone and begin punching the keys and looking up adoringly

at the lady's eyes or glistering breasts peeping out of her loose blouse. Sadi thought his eyes bore that lustful look similar to that of a dog eyeing the leg of a lamb on a butcher's table. He was certainly taking down her number – happily trapped by the displayed contours of her body, the scent of her perfume and the glittering rings.

For this, the sheep can only bleat inaudibly as it gives birth year-in-year-out for our tables, Sadi concluded in the silence of his heart and was immediately startled when he heard the young taximan groan bitterly, 'Vultures!'

Sadi turned to find the taximan kneeling beside the wheel he had removed.

'It is for them that we toil from sunrise to nightfall,' the taximan said angrily. He too must have heard the lady's laugh from the across the road.

'All the money they collect from us goes to these girls, *mimbo* and *jambo*,' the young man added. 'That is how they bully their way from one apartment to another carrying along house rents on them like ticks on a dog's ears and go on retirement without a house of their own after stealing all this money.'

Sadi ignored him and rummaged in the low bush nearby for the stones he had almost forgotten to look for. He found two and fitted them behind the two front tires to prevent the bus from rolling backward. He wiped his hands on his dirty jeans and listened to the taximan grumbling about the organized robbery by the forces of law and order in the pretext of conducting controls on the highway.

'A gang of thieves with no moral scruples that nobody is willing to denounce,' the taximan said. 'One thing is indisputable: many police and routiers in this country have their heart stuffed with thick black smoke of marijuana that they have no shame.'

Sadi had been listening to this kind of angry talk ever since he was a boy travelling with his father. As a man, fate had offered him as a living sacrifice on the alter of the forces

of Loot and Murder as one driver once referred to Columbus and his boys, by making him a bus driver.

As far as Sadi knew, the highway gendarmes and policemen received an average of seven thousand francs from him every day. Had he been dropping all the money he gave away into an empty twenty-liter paint bucket instead, he would have filled about five of such buckets over the last three years – saving enough to buy two more second-hand buses. He was certain that this disgraceful highway robbery would go on with verve and silent applause even after his death and his grandchildren, if he ever succeeded in having a child in the first place, would take up the song of complaint, paying their dues in silent tears so long as nobody thought it his duty to do something to change the course of this shameful activity for the better.

'It's fine now,' the taximan-mechanic said and kicked the newly fitted tire. 'Picked a nail. That is why I prefer tubeless. Slightly more expensive but safe.'

'Thank you very much,' Sadi said. He picked up the jack and replaced it under the seat, dumped the wrecked tire in too and locked the boot. He shoved one hand into his trouser pocket and began to cross the road towards the drum of *miondo*. At that very moment, a wave of multiple aggressive whistling brought him to a standstill. There was a red Carina cruising towards the police control post, towards him, from the direction of Njopongo. From about a hundred meters away, Sadi recognized that twisted bumper and identified the clandestine transport car. It was owned by one Lieutenant Colonel in Limbe and driven by his younger brother fondly called Squick Belmondo who always placed one of the colonel's deep-green berets on the dashboard close to the windscreen. The beret was his laissez-passer through all controls as he ferried passengers from Limbe to Douala and back.

'PRRRRRRRRR!' the whistles blasted. Columbus was determined to bleed Squick. His children might still be owing

fees or one of his numerous mistresses was pregnant and was insisting on an abortion. Columbus was out for business. He desperately needed money as always.

Two anxious policemen quickly positioned themselves in the middle of the road, each of them had one hand raised and the other hand holding a shrilling whistle in their mouth. Squick stubbornly nosed forward like a deaf bull. Seeing the determination on the twisted front bumper that headed straight for them, both policemen dove away, one to the left and the other to the right. Columbus who was holding the L-shaped spiked iron bar a few meters from the blockade immediately dropped his cigarette and tossed his bar into the road.

All these lasted not more than seven heartbeats.

Sadi plunged across the road and miraculously landed safely on his side in the bush beyond. He lay flat on his belly, folded his hands tightly over his head and squeezed his left temple against the shrubs with his eyes firmly closed. What followed was a series of deafening collisions followed by one loud mind-wrecking explosion. There was a short moment of silence during which those still alive like Sadi, shook the initial coating of shock and dared to look around.

Squick's cab was resting on its side with the roof leaning against the wheels of Sadi's upturned bus. The cab's three remaining tires spun like the kicking legs of a dying animal while fingers of black smoke wafted from the engine into the clear sky. The road was littered with fragments of shattered glass. On its mad race, the cab had brushed a coming double-cabin Hilux, lost whatever balance it had left before diving on to Sadi's bus for support. The Hilux too had received the caress with no grace at all as it swerved a complete circle and crashed into a gutter, knocking down two bystanders before settling into a snooze.

When the screams came, they came in one long blast, loud and thundering, quickly followed by heavy foot-falls as people emerged from every backyard and ran past Sadi still

crushed on the grass. Running feet dashed into the road without watching out for any coming car. Sadi stood up at last and dusted himself without moving a pace. His feet seemed to be glued to the spot as he gawked at the crowd converging towards the blockade. At first he saw people heading towards Squick's cab and then all of a sudden there was a change of course, followed by an animated scramble in the middle of the road. There was a policeman lying in the middle of the road, probably dead or unconscious. The taximan who had been standing beside Sadi only a while ago stuck out his foot and toppled an older man wearing a Dina Dell hat. The older man fell flat on his belly but went on grubbing with both hands, tearing at the policeman's trousers like a hungry pig eating up a dead fowl. Sadi saw the taximan sweep the floor towards his breast and then shove his hands into his pocket without standing completely upright and then dash forward again. They were all grubbing for something on the floor. Some rounded silvery objects fell from the taximan's pocket and bounced off the road. About four hands quickly went after the silver objects. The topless child, the *miondo* vendor, was down on his knees too salvaging what he could find between the feet of the older people.

Money! Pieces of Silver!

That was it. The police treasurer in an attempt to flee from Squick's cab had been knocked down, losing his treasure box. The booty for the day was now down for picks.

Sadi looked out for Columbus. It appeared a silent command had somehow been passed around. He caught the faint glimpse of two uniforms disappearing behind an Indian bamboo enclosure that served as a roadside liquor parlour. That was smart. No one would be able to identify the culprits, except the police boss who sent them out, of course.

'Petrol!'

Sadi jumped. It was the *miondo* vendor. The child had abandoned the hostile ground of punching fists and kicking feet to continue his search in the safe pockets of the

occupants of the tumbled cars. He was now hanging on one of the tires of Squick's cab that had stopped spinning. From where he stood, Sadi could see a clear liquid dripping from the mesh of metals on the upturned bottom of Squick's dead cab.

Fire! Sadi's brain registered in alarm and plucked his adrenaline pipe back in its rightful socket. His bus! Oh God, no!'

He sprung across the road like a frightened frog. On the other side, he stood still again, momentarily confused, his heart still numb from the registered horror. Like a tele-guided doll he trudged to the cab and peeped inside through one of the broken windows. It was silent. He saw at least three heads, surely with broken necks, lying in awkward angles from twisted bodies. Apart from the three bloody heads sticking out in various places from the mass of flesh, sprinkled with pieces of broken glass, he could tell from the many hands wrapped around one another like a jigsaw puzzle that there were other bodies beneath. There was no more glass on the smashed window. Sadi held the door frame and heaved. It didn't budge. He reached in gingerly, avoiding the pointed edges of broken glass, gripped a wrist with both hands and pulled. The arm came free, the force of his pull flinging him backward. He fell on his back on the tarmac and the amputated bloody female arm still wearing bangles dropped on his chest.

Sadi's shock finally took a voice. He screamed and pushed the arm away. His scream seemed to revise the priority of the looters. Or maybe the pieces of silver were now safely filed away so they could turn their attention to lifesaving. He saw heads turn his way and then running steps and voices barking orders, stopping oncoming cars and wailing. He stood up and stepped around to where his bus lay on its side with shattered glasses. He shook his head slowly.

What caught his sight next was the prodigal tire that had dissociated from Squick's cab before its collision. It now

seemed to have developed human appendages. Getting closer, Sadi recognized Azania's wrist, sticking out of the tire that lay on the man's chest. Azania's hand was holding out his communication gadget as though desperately offering it to someone. Sadi bent and lifted the tire off Azania's trunk. Azania's shirt was soaked with blood. Sadi heard him emit a short feeble groan. The speeding tire must have knocked him right on the chest. He was lucky to still be alive.

Sadi held Azania's wrist and saw him open his eyes for a second and then relax his fingers from around the gadget. He stooped to listen when he saw Azania's lips move but he couldn't catch the words. He noticed Azania folding the thumb and three fingers of the hand Sadi was still holding and pointing with the first finger at his electronic equipment now lying on the ground beside Sadi's knee. Sadi picked up the equipment, shoved it into his pocket, and stood up.

*

Life is indeed a rolling thing, I tell myself. It is not like a dead trunk. But even dead trunks are not static as they keep rotting every passing day. It is unforgivable cowardice to shrink away from moving a step of faith towards tomorrow. Sooner of later tomorrow catches up with the stagnant when they least expect and are the least prepared.

For no reason I can consciously determine, I move a finger from the left edge of my mouth to the bow-shaped scar beside my left earlobe where a policeman's truncheon had fiercely brushed my face on its way to another student's head.

As a student, I had harboured a profound hatred and disrespect for policemen. I fully agreed then with the saying that if authority goes against the requirements of morality, then it is not worth obeying. The scar always brings back

those angry memories of how ruthless and mean the police that is supposed to represent justice and the law can be.

Our university had been on strike and policemen had stormed the streets and students' hostels, beating up and maiming students and throwing tear gas. They broke into students' quarters, making away with cell phones, pressing irons and any portable electrical appliances they could lay their hands on. The policeman who gave me that scar had, like most of his colleagues, lined us up in front of our hostel and forced us to sing a song worded to the effect that a First School Leaving Certificate was greater than a Bachelor's Degree. Holders of the First School Leaving Certificate were employed, had a gun and great authority to wield as they saw fit, while degree holders roamed about jobless, begging for means of subsistence. They had nothing but the glory of 'big book' keeping them on feet encased in worn out shoes they had no means to replace.

But today, I feel differently about them and anyone else who ignorantly inflicts pain on a fellow brother or sister. It is horrible when we sit back and analyze our community critically and discover that it bleeds because of us. We are our worst problem.

As it is, only death retrogresses. We have to live on and strive to live better today than we did yesterday.

'This Columbus man, do you know his real names?' I ask Sadi. He shakes his head and says he doesn't know.

'But there is a record of what happened,' he adds.

'What record?' I ask, sitting up and tossing options around in my head.

He clips his mouth shut as if he regrets mentioning this.

'The camera.' It is Sirri who provides the answer. 'Azania's camera.' She clarifies. 'He recorded everything before the tire hit him.

Ah, Azania was in Sadi's bus? Azania of KTV is my husband's friend. Aza, as he is popularly known, has an underground network of agents equipped with secret video

cameras in every major town in the country. These agents dig up horrible tales with images that Aza treats, masking the actors, before letting them loose to the view of the hungry public. *Wasa Matanda* brings home to the family TV screen images of hidden fishermen poisoning creek water with toxic substances to kill fish for the market. The documentary brings to public view images of hidden breweries situated behind pit toilets involved in the lucrative business of brewing whisky from dangerous chemical substances, bottling and labelling with world-known brand names. It picks out roadside drugstores selling expired drugs at cheaper prices to parents who are ready to gamble with their children's lives under the pretext of poverty and at the same time drink themselves lame in beer parlours, spending several thousands in drinks, and only carried home to bury their children killed by dangerous cheap drugs.

During my eighteen months stay in the South I got my husband to enlist the services of Aza's boys to help me in my cleanup task.

Apart from the images of the accident, I wonder what other images might be in that camera..

'Where is the camera now?' I ask Sirri, wondering how she knows this. She stares at Sadi who doesn't show any sign of having heard my question.

'Well, what I want to know is whether the camera is in save hands.' I don't believe I sound as truthful as I mean in my bosom.

Sadi glares at me. I reckon he doesn't like me much.

'It remains the property of a near-dead man until he dies in which case it passes on to his appointed heir who will do with it as he pleases,' he says angrily.

Maybe I should leave that controversial camera end out for now. It looks tricky and brings around a feeling of suspicion.

'Madam, why you people pass all your time to hide the true,' it is Zacheus who asks, speaking in his horrible English

language for the second time since he greeted me when he walked into my office this morning.

'What do you mean?' I ask, knowing fully well what he meant.

'Now that you hear that there is a camera you wan to have it so that true can disappear. Is that not so?'

'That is not my intention, Mr. Esingi. I know Aza very well. He is a family friend. I must tell you that I have been working with him for a long time now. I just want to be sure that the camera and its content are safe. We may need it to straighten a few things, answer a few questions and get some people where they rightly deserve to be. Now can you tell me how you got involved in all this?' I ask Zacheus Esingi and realize he is taken aback by the question. Attack still remains an apt tool for defence.

'I . . .I was . . .' he babbles.

I need to make it easier for him.

'Which of them is your friend?' I ask. 'Which of the victims of the accident was or is your friend? How did you get involved in all of this to the extent of being arrested and locked up?'

He seems to relax.

'I know plenty of them. Grand Sadi, Mbodi, Grand Squicky . . . all of them na my people.'

'I see. Where were you when the accident occurred?'

'I don know. Maybe at my patron place. Maybe on the road to Sentinel Clinic Junction. The news meet me for the junction. With Mbodi and the other boys.'

4

There was a frosty excitement in the air breathe by everyone, be they passersby or permanent inhabitants who walked the main street of Njopongo that week consciously watching out for abnormalities. The excitement had some solidity about it that seem to grip everyone who let themselves to be folded in. Not that it originated from a grand event of general interest. To the ordinary man, it could be seen as a mere speck of social grouping dramatically blown mighty and rendered unnecessarily conspicuous by the few people concerned doing everything within their power to make it so. The strategy adopted was simple and incredibly effective. Who, in the heat of the afternoon, could be indifferent to the loud roar of motorcycles whose exhaust pipes had been removed or adorned with extra holes? Or who could be blind to a high-speed race involving over thirty motorcycles with horns blaring along the only tarred road in town. Motorcycle taxi riders or *Okadamen* or *Benskinners* were having elections on Saturday. The campaigns were hot. This, everyone must know.

Zacheus Esingi could feel the strange excitement. After the family brawl that led to Sirri packing her things and leaving her uncle's house, Zacheus' boss had been very upset. Zacheus had also learnt to take advantage of the mayor's moods. When Lobe was annoyed, he preferred to be driven to his tennis club and left alone to drink and watch others play tennis so that when Zacheus complained of a headache at the club, Lobe waved him away and said he could stay at home until Friday when he would be needed. The truth was that Zacheus himself was tired. For almost two weeks on a row he had been working from six in the morning to eleven or midnight, sitting behind the steering while and dutifully

accepting the thrashing of the AC. He needed some rest and he could only get one by complaining of an illness and he understood that his boss, like most cautious people, would not feel secured being driven by a man with a headache.

On his way home, Esingi noticed the habitual crowd of motorcycle riders at Sentinel Clinic Junction in front of Amougou's Messapresse stall where newspapers and magazines and office stationery were sold. Sentinel Clinic Junction was one of the many spacious grounds where *Okadamen* waited for passengers. Esingi decided to stop and listen to the *Benskinners'* analysis of the political and economic news of the week. He knew that Amougou, like most newspaper vendors situated in junctions like this, had long become accustomed to the reality that *Benskinners* never bought newspapers. From the moment Amougou opened his stall at six-thirty in the morning, the bikes began to gather. As he put up the papers, the headlines were read directly from the stands by the riders who could read and the animated debates ignited. The headlines were enough for the riders and carwash boys to studiously and convincingly analyze in detail the rest of the news in the hidden pages. *Okadamen* were known to be the most current persons deeply abreast with news on local issues and world affairs – they could spell out the full names of the five soldiers blown to pieces in the recent bomb blast in Afghanistan. They seem to know too much: why the gorilla war in the oil-rich Delta Region would or wouldn't last long, the medical history of the most recently arrested embezzler of public funds, the consequences of unpopular constitutional amendments here and there, the latest plane crash and the impossibility of recovering the black box . . . They knew it all and did their best to spread the news to the passengers they ferried to various corners of the town.

Zacheus loved to hang around to listen to these debates that went on late into the night before he retired to smoke a long finger of marijuana and go to bed, listening to the hazy

songs of hungry mosquitoes. Apart from the news from the national station that his boss forced him to listen to in the car, he would hardly know what else went on elsewhere around the world. The newspapers were not his thing. The mayor bought piles of them that he dumped in the backseat of the car. But Zacheus never pretended to read them during the long hours of waiting. The highest he did was look at the photographs and try to imagine the news behind them. Newspapers were not written for people like him. They were full of *big words* that he couldn't understand. And he couldn't ask the mayor to read and explain to him. That would be pure disrespect and the worse form of belittlement he could ever subject himself to. He didn't own a radio set at home. And something in his television set got burnt one evening after electricity was abruptly interrupted and suddenly reinstated without notification – a phenomenon that was officially known and waved like an insignificant fly around the dirt heap of the society's aching worries. Esingi had never bothered to take his TV set to the repairer. He hadn't the money to spend on services like TV repairs. His salary was thirty three thousand francs a month. Even if he did have the money, how many hours out of the twenty-four did he spend in his room? With these limitations on his shoulders, he contented himself with the news crumbs he could pick from gatherings like Amougou's stall. This kept him abreast with happenings, real or fictive.

As Zacheus approached the debaters, he spotted his friend Mbodi Kevin with baby powder on his neck and shirt collar standing in the middle of the clustered mass of men on motorcycles. He had almost forgotten that Mbodi had invited him to his daughter's bornhouse ceremony. He found Mbodi's empty Honda motorbike and sat on it to eat a loaf of bread filled with fried spaghetti and eggs he had bought from Touches.

It was evident that this Tuesday was exceptionally high-tide with Mbodi getting his wife and newborn baby out of the

hospital in the evening. Zacheus Esingi had witnessed a few *Okadamen bornhouses*. The escort team from the maternity often comprised of at least twenty motorcycles lined up in four columns in front of the one carrying the newborn baby lying in a basket placed over the petrol tank. The rest of the motorcycles followed behind, making the loudest noise they could with their horns and unhinged bike stands scrapping the pavement and letting out frightful sparks as the engines raved and roared. A child born of an *okadaman* must be accompanied home in fanfare in a convoy of *okadamen*. That was the rule.

Zacheus Esingi waved at Mbodi who was sauntering majestically around the other riders, complaining as usual. Zacheus had expected to find a cheerful Mbodi with a wide grin on his face, proudly talking about his wife and child and all the food and drinks and music he had prepared for the evening. But it seemed Mbodi had other more important issues in his mind at that moment. Mbodi was among those riders gifted with a mind that easily came up with stories that heated up cold, doubtful minds or tales that soothed the flaming spirit of his colleagues especially when work wasn't that good because of extreme weather conditions. Zacheus wondered what the papers might have said to get Mbodi so upset. Or was it the NMORA campaign spirit that had clasped him in its broad wings?

The prospects of a bike riders' union was hovering in the air like the prominent odour emitted by the rubber factory down town. The most anxious group was personal car owners who thought motorcycles were evil nuisances worth eradicating from public life. They compared motorcycle taxi to mosquitoes that did no good except take away innocent lives through the accidents they caused. Within a year, they argued, motorcycles had killed as many people as malaria did in three years.

As far as Zacheus Esingi knew, no body had reliable figures to prove this. Like all widespread statistics, the

constituted figures were based on subjective projections purely rooted in assumptions drawn from experiences dating long periods back and often from very doubtful sources. For instance, the last population census he could remember was conducted when he was still in primary school. But today, the mayor would give the demographic make-up of the division with a profound sense of confidence. Zacheus had never stopped marvelling at the techniques that are possibly applied by some renowned institutions to come up with the records they published year in year out on this community's social and economic status. Maybe with the evolution of technology, someone in any of the international offices out there just had to hit a 'count' button in a computer and the satellite spotted and rounded up every creature, living or dead, in the face of a specific area, into its wizardry memory.

The purported statisticians in Njopongo led by Samuel Ntinga the Divisional Delegate of Road Safety, strongly opposed the existence of motorcycle taxis along the streets and were shouting at the top of their voices that the activity should be banned. It was the most lethal informal sector activity, they argued, that generated no income to the Rural Council in terms of taxes. Instead, it inflicted huge social and economic costs to the community through the numerous accidents that occur daily.

The problems of this town are many, Zacheus thought, and took another bite of his bread, wondering if men like Samuel Ntinga ever considered the employment-creation part of the activity and how it enabled several families to feed themselves.

'This town na hell fire!' One rider was saying.

'Especially with this sun,' Mbodi added in confirmation. 'It burns my petrol tank so hot that it fries my buttocks whenever I overload.' From the way he screwed his brows as he spoke, it was clear that he considered this very important. Or there was something else in his mind.

'It is like some kind of punishment for the people,' Mbodi went on bitterly. 'And why won't God be enraged and punish us? We live a primitive life in modern times with all the resources He has put at our disposal.'

'Agree with you,' someone said. This was probably a mechanic on break. He was black all over with grease and engine oil. The whites of his eyes and the red inner linings of his lips gave him the look of those masqueraders who dressed in skirts of weaved dry plantains leaves and danced for money during Christmas.

'This place na some small village that is lucky to have electricity and one better road,' the greasy man said, wiping his face with the sleeves of his navy-blue khaki overalls. 'My stomach bite when I see what happen in this town.'

'Without cutting you short, Titus' Mbodi interrupted, 'We the people living in this town have carved out stone tablets like Moses and engraved on it our own ridiculous tenets of an ideal life. We are very greedy. You know what greed does to a man's sense of communion.'

'Kevin, you and bible!' Grease-faced Titus complained and shook his head.

'It is not bible I am talking here,' Mbodi cried out willingly. 'And even if it is bible, what is wrong in using it as my reference? Is that why no prayers are ever said in any of the official ceremonies in this town? Youth Day, National Day, Labour Day, Swearing-in ceremonies – no prayer! A people who don't believe in God! How can good things come to us? Anyway, that is the least of my worries. You saw what The Post wrote. Sixty percent of the families here have at least a son, or a daughter or a parent in Europe or the United States. Seven out of ten young men between the ages of fifteen and thirty five who have relatives abroad abandon school before Form Five. They don't have jobs and do not see why they need one. Look at Mbeng Lucas, for example. He is a fat and shiny example. With a father in Belgium and a sister in Canada, he doesn't strain to earn a living. His main

preoccupation is the ever-engaging competition on who has the most expensive and rare pair of shoes with sky-gazing tips like the tusk of a rhino.'

'Pointinini!' Titus burst out laughing. 'That is how they call the shoes. Crocodile Croco.'

'What is wrong with having people abroad or wearing *pointinini*?' Another rider with a headscarf tied around his head asked. He sounded very annoyed. 'It is their luck. Only the unfortunate and jealous and poor and like you see something wrong in that.'

Zacheus Esingi recognized him as Seleka. Seleka was a motorcycle rider and repairer famous in stealing and selling working parts from broken motorcycles brought to him to repair.

'Thank you,' Mbodi said with a sarcastic grin. 'You can't see anything wrong in this because you are one of them. You all have the same eagle vision, seeing things in different colours.'

'Jealousy na poor,' Seleka grumbled, started his motorcycle and shouted for the others to clear their bikes from his way. He rode off, raising a dark cloud of dust.

'Let him go,' Titus said, and then turned to Mbodi with a mischievous smile on his dark face. 'Papa Girl, tell us about this evening. Who is the DJ?'

'I haven't made the arrangements yet,' Mbodi said, frowning slightly as though he wasn't ready to resurface the thought of this evening's ceremony that he had conveniently pushed to a corner of his mind. He, however, must have thought he could as well use the question to pass across what he had in mind.

'Talking about this *okada* business,' Mbodi said, waving his hand at the gathered bikes. 'If I was not at my aunt's place that night, I would have lost my wife and my girl. You know where my aunt leaves. Down Quarter Two where no taxi goes to because of all those potholes. They had to tie my girl and me back-to-back with ropes on top of this my Honda. As

soon as I reached the steps of St Bernard and they loosened us, the baby started coming out. It was that night that I knew I was an *okadaman*. I don't know who got this wonderful idea to introduce motorcycle taxi in Njopongo. Wonderful solution for us with gaping holes in almost all our roads.

He cited one of his colleagues saved from the jaws of misery.

'Before Solo became a rider,' Mbodi said in his story-telling tone, 'he worked with CABACO Ltd. Every morning, including Sundays, he got up at three, when his daughter was still asleep, to get ready for the truck that picked workers at four for the tea plantation where they slaved until six-thirty in the evening. The truck only brought him home again at eight in the night, usually after his daughter had gone to sleep again. Imagine your own child growing up with her father in the same house without knowing him.'

Mbodi paused to let the image receive its due amount of paints in the minds of his listeners. Then he went on to describe in detail the scene that made Solo weep and decide to quit his job. Solo had an injury in the plantation and was given two days off without pay, Mbodi narrated. His daughter Annie was nine months old and practicing her newfound means of locomotion after graduating from creeping. Out of routine, Solo got up at three, feeling bored. He put on the TV, a TV he hardly ever had time to watch. He was sitting on the edge of the bed watching *roundup* when he heard soft movements and a small voice babbling behind him. He turned to see Annie seated and pocking her mother's face with a comb she took from the bedside cupboard.

'Ma ma ma,' Annie was calling her mother and pointing at Solo. Solo tuned down the volume of the TV, placed the remote on the TV stand and turned towards his daughter with outstretched arms. To his dismay and shock, the child retreated from him. When he tried to get closer, she crawled backward until she had her back against the wall.

'When Solo touched her face, the small girl emitted a wild shrill like this.' And Mbodi squealed like a pig. His audience burst out laughing.

'From that day, Solo began looking for an *okada* to ride,' Mbodi said and stared from one set of eyes to another. 'For those of us who have wives and children, we work because of them. We toil everyday to raise our children to be something. But when you find yourself in a position like Solo's, with a daughter who risks growing up and never knowing her father or detesting him because he was never there when she needed him, then we have to review our priorities. We have to realize that we are fetching water in a leaking calabash.'

Of course it was true that most of us spend a quarter of our lifetime fetching water in a leaking calabash. Zacheus thought he was one of those people who must have spent more than a quarter of their life fetching water in a basket. At the age of twelve he got kicked out of his stepfather's house. It was on an afternoon in the month of September when parents prepared their children for school reopening. Chisel-teeth Nusukane, as Zacheus' stepfather was nicknamed because of his long incisors that poked out of his sliced upper lip, had come home humming merrily with fumes of alcohol wafting in the air around him. Zacheus had had the bad grace to remind him about his registration fees.

'Get out of my sight Satan,' Chisel-teeth had lisped and hiccoughed.

Zacheus detested being called Satan and Chisel-teeth knew this. To get back at Chisel-teeth, Zacheus raked his brain for a retaliating churchy blow. He recalled what his teacher of Religious Knowledge taught them about the respect of the Sabbath. Esingi's tiny mind was most suitable for retaining controversies like this especially when they were hinged on religion and had the potential of questioning the moral stance of those people who saw themselves greater than others – Nusukane for instance.

Esingi told his drunk stepfather that his teacher said the devil's disciples had defiled the Sabbath of the lord and proclaimed Sunday a day of worship so that men like Chisel-teeth could refuse to pay their children's school fees, get drunk on Saturday, spend the night in a gutter and still managed to get into their white robes of Church Elders and serve Holy Communion to the congregation during Sunday Service. Chisel-teeth staggered to his toolbox, found an old, mighty padlock and an equally ancient hammer. He trudged angrily to the door to Zacheus' room, knocked off the small padlock with one mighty blow of the hammer. With the hinges destroyed he went back to his toolbox and got out four seven-inch nails and sealed the door

'Bundle your evil spirit away from my house, offspring of Lucifer,' Nusukane had slurped satisfactorily after replacing his tools. He withdrew to his favourite spot on a bamboo sofa beside the kitchen, muttering the names of all evil spirits he could conjure up against Zacheus. He fell asleep still muttering.

That same night, Zacheus got that same axe from behind the kitchen door where Chisel-teeth still slept off his drunkenness and split the wooden door down the middle. He crawled in while Chisel-teeth still snoozed and stuffed his belongings into a Sacks & Motors bag and moved out. That same night Zacheus found a home and company in a band of boys who lifted gearboxes for muscles and puffed out clouds of grey smoke through their nostrils as they smoked thick, long filaments of marijuana wrapped in pieces of typing sheets for courage.

That was how, like a raw piece of metal, Zacheus Esingi joined the factory that forged and spat forth men with hollow, massive hearts that were highly receptive of love that no one bothered to give. Men who only existed in the threshold of life and who were fortunate to be animated by that profound sense of hope that one day they too would live – even just for a moment – before falling into eternal sleep.

These were men who knew the true meaning of toil and hardship. Men scorned by all those who didn't share their fate and couldn't understand if the word destiny existed in their world. All strangers who by sheer bad-luck found themselves in this street-children dungeon, in their fright to save the light for themselves alone, branded the rats of this dark neighbourhood with names effective enough to bring about their eradication from the slums of existence.

No one wanted to spend a fraction of their busy minute to reflect on the possible ways of building a fire in these slums to heat and light up the lives of the piteous inhabitants. No one thought street-children needed salvation from the shadows of mere existence to the rays of living. Zacheus Esingi grew up among the despised of the community. He was counted amongst those brandished as nuisance.

There was something else Zacheus knew. By virtue of the fate society dumped on them, his friends were among the few men who said a genuine 'Thank You' from the heart in the face of genuine generosity from the same source. In the same light, he, like the others, were trained to recognize scorn and greedy exploitation from a distance and to react to them with an agility that often surprised the perpetrators. It was mostly this last quality of theirs that earned them the name of criminals, outlaws, delinquents.

During his life in the street children factory and even after he was purged out, Zacheus Esingi had been tempted to change his name several times, in the same way as he had changed many aspects of his physical and moral features. For instance, a year into his new life as a street child, when Delano was among the top music stars, Zacheus dyed his hair yellow, pierced his ears and nose to accommodate rings. He had dropped out of school when Chisel-teeth locked him out of his house. He stopped attending church services reclaiming the reinstitution of Saturday as the day of worship before he would resume. He also took up lifting gear boxes and bricks and any other load that would build his muscles –

the most convenient defence mechanism like an insect's foul secretion in his world of survival-of-the-fittest.

During his days as a parkboy, Zacheus survived the customary contamination of nicknames that plagued members of that circle. Zacheus Esingi kept his name. It was one of the unique attributes that distinguished him from his mother. He had spent the first twelve years of his life in Njiba, in a village alleged to have more mature men than women to go round. As usual, there was no statistics to confirm this anyway. The allegation demonstrated how men dispensed a huge amount of energy trying to justify wrongs instead of the small push that would have been required to right wrongs. The few available women in Njiba took upon themselves the duty to engage in TCE (term conjugal engagements): eighteen months as Mrs. X, one child born. Feeling sufficiently bored, the woman tore the contract form hanging on the tip of her tongue and moved on with her child to become Mrs. Y, usually not very far from the home of her first stop. In this way women changed names as they coupled and uncoupled, bearing children as they moved along, accomplishing their duty of making every man proud of having at least a child. It was a mark of great achievement for a woman in Njiba to have a long list of widowers read at her funeral. The men of Njiba on their part were naturally patient and tolerant. Jealousy and greed weren't in their nature. They understood and greatly cherished the reward that came from waiting. They believed that women were scares and so they developed a thick coating of lustful tolerance to accommodate this reality, each man waiting for his turn.

Zacheus' mother, in her lifetime, had honoured five men with six children. Only two of the children shared the same father. In Njiba where children sprouted like weed on fertile soil, only very few were lucky to go to school to the level of obtaining a First School Leaving Certificate. Even though the quarrel between Zacheus and his last stepfather ended his

education, Zacheus considered himself privileged to have been able to school long enough to know how to write his name. First School or not, he could recognize his name written on any wall in clear handwriting. This name he was not ready to change and start another school of learning how to identify and carve a new name.

Another remarkable quality of his name was that it misled many and that pleased him. He loved to be a mystery. He held the view that hearing the name Zacheus Esingi for the first time brought to mind the picture of a dwarf with trailing trousers and oversized polo shirt. But as soon as one saw that wry smile on that face that had once suffered from an unprofessional slice of a knife from the temples to the edge of his left upper lip, an immediate transformation of perception occurred.

Now at the age of thirty-two Zacheus Esingi was a massive bag of muscles and bones, habitually encased in tight fitting slacks and V-necked T-shirt. He weighed eighty nine kilograms and loomed a meter and eighty three. He had always been taken for a boxer because of his muscles which he hardly ever put into effective use until he met Mbodi that faithful morning. It was the morning that first changed the course of his life.

Mbodi's aunt traded in pepper soup beef. Before Mbodi took on taxi motorcycling, he was the one who placed his aunt's orders and transported the butchered meat every morning in a wheelbarrow from the slaughterhouse to her shade in the market. He burnt the hide and smoked whatever unsold meat that Mama Joki's freezer couldn't contain in the evening. Early one morning, Zacheus Esingi was idling at Treasury entrance waiting for a free taxi to take him to the motor-park when Mbodi came around the junction in a bicycle instead of his rattling rusty wheelbarrow. It was unusual to find him at this hour without the wheelbarrow and stains of blood and particles of fresh meat on his once-white overall.

'What happen today?' Zacheus had asked with the sole intention to be polite. After all, they were next-door-neighbours who had not crossed each other ever since they lived together.

'Good morning,' Mbodi had said in return as though Zacheus had greeted him first. 'Leonel has typhoid as usual after a party,' he added, sounding very unhappy. 'Whenever there is an occasion in town, invited or not, Leonel is there. He drinks and drinks and drinks until everyone else is gone. He is always the last person to leave in the morning very drunk. He doesn't show up for work like today. No man to draw the cow down. Baba is there chanting verses of anger.'

Leonel was the slaughterer's assistant. He was the one who placed the looped ropes around the legs of the cow and pulled the animal down for slaughter. His absence that morning meant that no cow would be slaughtered unless Baba found another *drawer* fast.

Zacheus Esingi's eyes shrunk as he tried to work out the meaning of this. Given the rate at which Leonel drank, he must be making some money from this cow business. At that precise moment Zacheus was broke. 'How much do they pay to drop one of them?' he asked, trying not to show his eagerness.

'It depends. From two to even six thousands. It depends! Especially on a day like this when Baba is desperate. I am desperate. Old Woman has a big command that must not be lost. She will be very annoyed. You know CDC is paying today.'

'Okay. How long can it take to do that?' Zacheus had asked as though time mattered to him. He could be absent from the motorpark for the whole week and very few people would miss him. In fact Boris and Esien would definitely be pleased to have the loading all to themselves.

'You mean you want to . . .' Mbodi ran his eyes over him, beginning from his broad chest. He looked doubtful but

secretly pleased with the mass of muscles standing in front of him.

'For you,' Zacheus said. But from the feeble smile he saw in Mbodi's eyes, he knew the other man knew he needed the money more than any desire to help a neighbour in need.

Mbodi accompanied Zacheus to the slaughterhouse that morning, introduced him to a receptive Baba. Zacheus Esingi put his muscles into work, delighted Baba and ended up with a job of tripping down cows for slaughter every morning and evening. He worked there for eleven months before meeting the mayor's wife who had come to place an order for a cow in view of her husband's installation ceremony as the mayor of Njopongo municipality. Zacheus and Baba Mousa had slaughtered the cow in the mayor's compound. It was then, during his conversation with Mousa, that Madam learnt that Zacheus was a driver and his history as a street-child qualified him for a bodyguard. The mayor's driver had just died of meningitis and he needed someone immediately.

For three years since then Zacheus and Mbodi had been together. Mbodi was a great friend, someone who understood him and took him for who he was. He was one of the few companions who understood the needs of a chronic smoker and never wasted his energy in advising Zacheus to stop the practice.

'Men of God are killed by worm infections,' Mbodi often said in defence of those accused of excesses. To him everybody's path had been traced from birth and trying to deviate from this predetermined course was absolute hypocrisy and a dangerous test of the divine wrath.

He owed Mbodi this change of lifestyle, Zacheus told himself and drifted back to the rally ground around Amougou's shop.

It appeared Mbodi considered his *okadamanship* as a divine providence as he now coughed expansively and flung his towel across his shoulder.

'I am not ashamed to be an *okadaman*,' Mbodi said. 'I am not saying that I will go around encouraging others to join me. No. In the real sense of it, I don't consider what we are doing as a profession. But it happens to be what we are doing at the moment. So we are obliged to put in our best. That is why I want you all to vote for me on Saturday.'

So this was it! A loud applause and whistling and honking and shouting erupted suddenly. Zacheus Esingi threw away the piece of cement paper in which his loaf of bread had been wrapped and clapped too.

Mbodi squinted as though in serious reflection. Zacheus could see that he was bobbling with the heat of the excitement his last words fetched him. 'Yes, I want to help us all happily bear this moment of transition. For it is indeed a moment of transition . . .'

'Like father like son,' Titus shouted. 'Hurrah, Aza-the-Second!'

'Like father like son!' a few more voices shouted

'If you ask me,' Mbodi interrupted. 'I will tell you that we shall build a better society if young people stop admiring our learned administrators, thieves hiding behind pieces of paper, who have proven to be as illiterate as my grandfather Songo who, as treasurer of his *njangi* group back in nineteen eighty six, swindled all the members' savings and said thieves had broken into his house.'

There was absolute silence. Zacheus could hear every breath inhaled and exhaled.

'Grandpa Songo put the stolen money in an Ovaltine can,' Mbodi went on, 'and buried the can in his cocoa farm, just like our ministers do today, hide cartons of money in the ceiling of their houses for lucky people like Mulem to stumble upon and become rich overnight. My Grandpa hadn't a mansion so he buried his booty in his farm and marked the spot with some dry cocoa pods. Then as the Big Man up there often does His things, the August flood came and swept all farms clean. Pa Songo's farm wasn't left out. All the fallen

dry leaves and twigs were swept away. Unable again to identify the tree under which he had hidden the money, Pa Songo couldn't find the voice to cry away his shame and frustration. His greedy dreams were washed away by the muddy water of the overflowed Mongo River, leaving a shiny surface in his conscience on which he could clearly see the reflection of the faces and hearts he had wounded all the days of his miserable life.'

'Is that a true story?' Titus asked, sniffing. 'I haven't seen that one on KTV.'

Mbodi ignored the question and remark. Jokes were over. He was in a flight for a purpose and wouldn't indulge in distractions.

'The parents of this present generation have decided to destroy our future and the future of our children and the rest of the generations to come,' Mbodi said, gritting his teeth. 'They are bent on extinguishing us all and they are already succeeding. A people who place their lives in the talons of sorcery, live a life choked with greed's perpetual need. With such a mighty desire to grasp more for themselves, they can never have enough. That is why they cannot give happiness to anyone else because they are always hungry. The bad news is that they are the ones holding the paddle and sitting on the stern of the canoe. We are on the floor board with our hands tied with fear, selfishness or the foolish desire for self-survival. The good news is this: we have one option – to topple the canoe and let everyone determine his destiny. We have had enough.'

'Thank you Presi,' Titus shouted. 'I will carry your bag, fly your flag and distribute your fliers.'

'How does all what you have just said concern us?' one of the riders asked Mbodi.

'We need organizations and institutions that work,' Mbodi replied. 'If we can succeed to have a workable union, we as riders, a union that meets the aspirations of its members and the immediate community, others will learn.

We are not too small to set the standards and teach others from our achievements.' He dropped his voice now as he added, 'It is because of this that we must not fail. In order to avoid failure, let us vote for success. I represent success. I, Mbodi Azania Kevin.'

It was precisely at this moment that the news was blown in like the smell from a belched pit toilet. Seleka, who had recently left annoyed that the assembly criticized lovers of *pointinini*, swerved dangerously from the road and gunned his motorcycle straight into the gathering. He squeezed the brakes suddenly, jerking the bike's hind tire, a cloud of dust rushed towards Amougou's newspaper stands. The last piece of bread in Zacheus' mouth suddenly turned to sawdust when Seleka broke the news.

Some people call it the moment of truth. That very short instance when you fervently hope that you are in a dreadful dream from which you will be shaken to wakefulness. It is that moment when you wish you have a hearing impairment that makes you seem to hear things that aren't said or a partially blind eye that plays tricks and brings forth images that aren't real. Luckily, that instance doesn't last long. Either it throws you down or you bravely shake yourself from the clutches of escape and face whatever raw truth that has been slapped cold on your face.

The first word that Seleka pronounced froze every movement.

'Accident!' he said before anyone could rebuke his rough intrusion.

A second or so went by before the first question was asked. And it was a single word.

'Where?'

'Miondo Bar, just at the police control,' Seleka said, breathing heavily as though he had just been chased by death itself. Seleka's loose tongue helped to loosen a few more tongues and got more questions flying at him.

'Who?'

'Any dead?'

'Aza . . . Azania of KTV!'

So far Mbodi hadn't spoken. When the last answer dropped like warm blood from Seleka's mouth, Zacheus turned towards Mbodi and watched him go through the instinctive ritual of sudden body tenseness with his lips parted and his eyes dimmed as his mind took off on a flight several lives and moments away. This was quickly followed by a shudder as the mind hits a cosmic wall and ricochets back to solid earth. Mbodi was shaken and probably broken but he did his most to keep the shattered pieces in place.

'Where is he?' Mbodi didn't sound like he was asking for the whereabouts of his father's remains. He must have received assuring news, different from Seleka's, from wherever his mind might have taken him a few seconds before. He was asking for a living Azania, the king of *Matanda*.

Zacheus Esingi wished in God's name that Mbodi was right, that there was a mistake somewhere. Probably, some bits and pieces of the news must have been blown from Seleka's mind by the wind that restrained his ride back to Sentinel Clinic Junction.

The rally was over. In less than three minutes the riders were mounting their motorcycles, choosing their directions and riding off in groups. Zacheus Esingi took the passenger's seat on Mbodi's motorcycle and they rode off, horns blaring, straight to the District Hospital.

To Zacheus, the hospital didn't look like a place currently handling an emergency. There were a few people who had probably heard of the accident and had rushed to the hospital for various reasons. Some might have come to accompany others who felt they might know someone among the victims. Most of them were hanging along the corridor leading to the maternity ward talking animatedly.

'Big big disaster!' someone said.

'Na police cause the accident,' another added.

'Bribe bribe bribe!'

Zacheus and Mbodi took the next bend to the left that led to the accident ward. The row of beds looked even more ancient with rusty-brown iron posts that had once been painted white.

There was a woman lying very still in the bed closest to the door. The sheets on her bed were deeply stained with blood. She must have passed out from pain and haemorrhage. Her right leg was roughly bandaged with what looked like a torn piece of a blanket. From the blood in the thick cloth around her tibia, it was evident that she had a fracture or a series of fractures. Her still eyes were swollen and black, possible from a grave impact. Next to her was a man. Zacheus couldn't see his face because of the bandage that exposed only a mouth from which came rough groans of anguish like the humming of a bad AC. The man still had some energy to be writhing about the bed like a beaten snake. He moved his head slowly from side to side, emitting groans as he did so. A woman sat on the floor holding the bedpost with one hand and nestling a baby with the other. She looked as though she had cried herself limp and dump. She stared blankly at Zacheus and Mbodi with eyes that didn't seem to be recording anything.

Four beds down the row, Zacheus stopped dead.

'Grand Squicky!' He said in a voice full of shock. He recognized Squick Belmondo from his stripped short-sleeved shirt that had become his trademark. Zacheus' heart pounded hard against his ribs as he moved closer.

'Grand Squick!' he muttered again.

'Man is nothing!' Mbodi whispered from behind Zacheus.

For a brief second Zacheus imagined himself in the bed in which Squick now laid and a shiver ran down his body.

'If na someone do this, I swear by your head, Grand Squicky!' Zacheus cried out. 'Them go pay. I promise, them go pay with tears!'

'I can't see my father,' Mbodi said in a whisper as though he was merely thinking aloud.

'And where the doctors?' Zacheus asked.

Apart from the five or so patients on the beds and some faces peeping from the windows with broken panes, the medical personnel were nowhere to be seen around the ward.

Mbodi turned and dashed out of the room. Zacheus followed him reluctantly, throwing questioning glances across his shoulder at Squick's bed as they left the ward.

'He go die,' Zacheus said as though to himself. 'Grand Squicky go die.'

They marched down the corridor through which they had come. The reception desk had to be at the edge of the long corridor to the right, opposite the theatre. It must have been from the awful look on Mbodi's face: Zacheus realized that those boys and women idling along the corridors quickly dashed aside, giving way as they approached and then fell hastily behind the two in a discreet pursuit.

There was a nurse sitting behind a small table and fidgeting with a pen and a ledger in front of her with thick brown covers.

'Good evening Madam,' Mbodi said, still looking around anxiously. The woman slowly glanced up at them, murmured something to the effect of acknowledging the salutation and then went back to thumbing her note book.

'Please, where is my father?' Mbodi asked, trying hard to be calm.

Zacheus grabbed Mbodi's hand and squeezed, signalling him to keep his peace. He noticed that the reception area was steadily crowding. Those who had been peeping from various corners a long distance away and those aimlessly roaming the corridors sniffed the air of trouble in Mbodi's wake and drew closer to form a semi-circle around the reception desk.

The nurse showed no sign of having heard Mbodi's question and this seemed to really annoy him. He pulled his hand free from Zacheus' and planted his fists on the table so

that his head was level with the receptionist's. The presence of an audience seemed to increase the width of Mbodi's chest.

'Madam, can't you forget about that book for a minute?' Mbodi asked.

Again the woman ignored him.

Like most *okadamen*, Mbodi was notoriously impatient and the presence of a small crowd around them woke the sleeping rudeness in him.

'I am asking you. Where is my father?' Mbodi growled and banged a fist against the table. The woman jumped in fright. She slowly closed the book but maintaining her left two fingers inside as though to mark an important page.

'This is a hospital, my friend,' she said admonishingly. 'They don't raise voices here.'

The people booed.

'No one said it is a bar,' Mbodi retorted. 'Where is my father?'

This time a chorus of laughter ensued.

'Is your father suppose to be the prime minister that everyone must know?' the woman demanded.

'Where the doctor?' Zacheus asked, sensing that Mbodi was adequately flustered to cause trouble.

'What do you want the doctor for?' the nurse demanded.

If there was a sneering championship, Zacheus thought there wasn't anybody more fit to grab the trophy than this woman. She didn't seem to notice all the anxious faces and booing noises made around her desk.

Mbodi poked his finger in the direction of the accident ward. 'Have you seen those people in there?' he asked.

The nursed sighed, 'I have been on duty since morning.' She said for an answer, with her nose always in the air as if the men around her stunk. 'What about them?'

'So she doesn't know,' someone said from over Zacheus' shoulder.

'I think they are dying and need your attention,' Mbodi shouted. The nurse smiled. She appeared absolutely calm.

'This is not a zoo,' she said to Mbodi calmly.

'Those people are dying, making this place more than a zoo,' someone said in the crowd.

'What are all of you doing here?' the woman asked, her voice rising. 'Get out! Get out all of you!' seeing that her outburst yielded no reaction, she breathed out heavily and turned her attention to Mbodi.

'Thank God she notices,' another voice said.

She took the other hand out of the book and placed both hands, palms up, on the table and stared straight into Mbodi's eyes.

'Oya, Man, deposit!'

Mbodi's mouth flew open. He gawked at Zacheus. 'What is she saying?'

Zacheus shrugged.

'I am saying four hundred and eighty for the four of them,' the woman said, gleefully, 'One hundred and twenty each before the doctor can attend to them.'

It seemed the hall had suddenly become filled with those dark clouds that appear in a stormy night in the heart of the rainy season. A furious rumbling filled the air as the people grumbled and shouted and argued

'What?' Mbodi found his voice again and cried out above the noise. 'So if there is no money – '

'When you were coming in, did you see a signboard saying Charity Home for the Sick?' the woman snarled 'If you don't mind, I have work to do. No deposit, no treatment. That is how it works here.' She returned to her book. Someone immediately stepped forward, snatched the book from her hands and jumped back into the crowd.

'Now you will surely attend to these people,' someone said from behind Zacheus.

Zacheus recalled that a year after Lobe became mayor, a group of young people running an NGO called the *Dynamic*

Advocates of Life, drew up a thirty-nine page memorandum that they submitted to the Njopongo Rural Council. Among the many recommendations they made was the implementation of a health care program that ensured free and maximum first aid coverage to patients in critical conditions. An example of a critical condition they listed was accident victims.

Mayor Lobe had made it clear that the Council didn't have resources to wastes on people who got careless with their lives. 'If anyone didn't value his life and paid to have his brains crushed by a truck, the Council cannot be held responsible,' he had said in a public statement he made to give the Council's stand on the NGO's proposal. 'The government does not have the resources to throw away on irresponsible citizens who buy death with money.' He had called on friends, families and other well-wishers to come to the assistance of those in need as this was the most appropriate way to manifest *solidarity* and *national harmony*. That put to rest any prospects of the possible birth of a primary health care program people might have been nursing. When the NGO tried to shout louder, the president was invited and greased. He ate alone as most leaders did. This enraged the other members to the extent that everyone else walked away, strangling the organization to its ultimately death.

'Where is my father? Where is Azania?' Mbodi asked, this time sounding tired.

The name brought on a look of immediate recognition and reverence into the nurse's eyes.

'Aza. Is he . . . they took him away.' It was wonderful how she suddenly transformed at the mention of the name of the presenter of the women's most popular show. 'Let me check. Where is my book?'

A hand from the crowd sent it over.

'Can you people leave?' She asked, staring past Mbodi's shoulders as she began to leaf through the ledger in front of her muttering the name Aza.

'I remember,' she said, biting her finger. 'His brother refused to sign the register.'

'Where they take him?' Zacheus asked and wondered why Squick was still there.

'I think I heard them mention Polyclinic. They must have taken him to Douala.'

Mbodi grabbed Zacheus' arm and spun him around.

'Let's go,' he said.

Zacheus resisted his pull. Squick's face blocked his mind's view as he glanced towards the accident ward again.

'Ah you serious about what you talk about them?' Zacheus asked the nurse, pointing towards the ward.

'I am not the one who makes the rules here,' the woman replied, her voice taking a docility that surprised Zacheus. 'One hundred and twenty francs flat is what we take for all critical cases that come here. Otherwise no doctor will touch them. They are even lucky to have a bed.'

'Life means nothing to anyone these days,' Mbodi complained as they rode away from the hospital some minutes later after looking in again at Squick peacefully sleeping in his blood.

'It is not their fault,' Zacheus told Mbodi as though back in the night. 'No one take responsibility. Don't worry. For the name of Squick I shall come back with the deposit. I pray to God that before the time I come, no one of them have die. If so, they go hear me in this town. Maybe I go put fire in that hospital before taken to prison.'

Squick was Zacheus' man. Squick taught him how to drive when he was still a carwash boy. Squick trusted him enough to give him his car as a *Secureman* to run the Njopongo-Douala road when Squick had other things to do. Thanks to what Squick taught him, he was today the mayor's driver.

From the moment they left Squick's bedside, Zacheus Esingi began sampling different action plans in his mind. He had to contribute in his own way to bring Squick back to life.

For this purpose, he permitted himself to invoke his streetboy's instinct that had been lying dormant for all these years. In less than twenty minutes, he had settled on one plan he considered effective but daring and out rightly dangerous. What he needed was one or two volunteers to help him realize it. By the time he and Mbodi parted ways, he had had one potential volunteer in mind.

*

I remember one of the stories my Mama loved telling us. It is the story of a very wealthy landlord who owned a big stone house built on top of a hill. All the villagers who were his tenants brought him two-thirds of their grains and yams and smoked meat and fish for using his land and water wells. All these he kept in four huge underground vaults built inside his house.

Then one year a terrible flood came and washed the land, killing people and animals and destroying houses and crops in the land. Only the wealthy man was unaffected. After the flood waters dried off, a hash famine ensued. Only the landlord had enough to last him several seasons.

Unable to bear the hunger any longer, the people soon began flocking up the hill to beg their landlord for food. The starving villages cried out their plea to pay back double as soon as they could plant and harvest again.

'How can they expect me to give out my food . . . to how many of them?' the landlord asked himself. His vault would be diminished. And he needed the assurance that came with just opening the vault door and looking at the marvellous mounts of food stacked in bags. He decided that he wasn't prepared to starve. If he gave them food today they would come tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow until his reserve went dry. No he couldn't!

So he maintained the bolts on all the doors to his fortified mansion while women, children and the old wept outside from dawn to dusk. The younger people, tired of begging soon took off to seek for livelihood wherever their remaining strength could take them. With a heart like the stones from which his house was built, the wealthy landlord didn't miss his sleep despite all scratching and moaning as the desperate villagers climbed up to the roof hoping to find inlets into the food store. But none of them succeeded in getting into the landlord's house.

As time passed the noise outside grew fainter and then finally died out. The landlord had become used to the cries of supplication. The sound of the voices had begun serving as appetizer whenever he dined. When the cries finally ceased he began to worry. What might have happened to the people? He wondered. Maybe they had all gone elsewhere to look for help. He was sure that if they did not find any food they would come back to him. How he had come to like the cries of the babies searching for milk in dry breasts!

Shortly afterwards, he began sensing a very terrible odour whenever the wind blew through the narrow spaces between the stone walls. As time passed, the stench became so strong that he could no longer eat. He spat and vomited until he could bear it no longer

He must open the doors to let in fresh air.

As soon as he pulled back the bolts of the main door, decaying bodies pushed the door wide open and crumbled on him, toppling him over. The decomposing fleshes smeared his body and made creamy puddles on the floor.

The landlord cried out in horror as he saw mounts of dead bodies strewn over his front yard and right up to the roof of his house. How was he going to get rid of all these bodies?

I often tell myself that there are many of us who harbour stronger doses of greed than that which filled the heart of the rich landlord.

My sister once told me that I am not allowed to have such thoughts as I am a member of the government. I doubt if they have forgotten that I am a human being before anything else. I will always keep asking myself what motivates ministers and directors to embezzle billions of francs CFA and bury in cemented holds in the floor of their rooms while projects rot in the drawers in their offices. One of my husband's former classmates Elesa Abraham had his own stolen billions wrapped in plastic bags and stuffed in openings knocked out of a section of the wall in his bedroom. The wall was plastered again and a huge beautiful gold-framed painting of the Last Supper hung over the area.

So what happens when we amass it all for ourselves and everyone else perishes around us?

And this new plaque has become the main topic of discussion in every gathering, especially in gatherings of young people who see no future for themselves. In classrooms and offices and churches and drinking parlours and farms, people are engaged in debates centred on embezzlers of public funds and harassment by the police and taxation authorities. It has become a song so frequently repeated that the meaning has mixed with every other common phrase, reducing it to mere insignificant babbling.

I was in the middle of a meeting when I was called by the commissioner of police and informed of the accident at Miondo Bar. I called the mayor who told me he was in the middle of a very important budget meeting so he couldn't accompany me to the scene. Adamou was so furious with the mayor's response that while I was calling my driver to get the car ready, I heard him talking to the governor himself, informing him about the accident and not forgetting to tell him what the mayor had said to me on the phone. After the call, Adamou told me to wait for the mayor who was already on his way. Terrible how men liked to be pushed around to identify top priorities in their duties!

After about three hours of driving from Njopongo to Miondo Bar where the accident took place and back to make a tour of three of the hospitals where some of the bodies have been deposited, I called my friend Doctor Agbor Amina. She worked at the Delegation of Public Health in Buea. I asked her to round up her best colleagues and run an urgent crisis meeting. By seven I was stone-tired. And that was when I had the misfortune to be invited by the mayor to dine with him at his home and 'discuss'. For once I was grateful that my family has not yet come to live with me.

5

While Zacheus Esingi and his volunteers might have been holding their own version of a crisis meeting in a stuffy small room with mosquitoes nibbling their feet, we were holding ours in Lord Mayor Mapito Lobe Cornelius' mansion over bottles of wine and a sumptuous meal.

Lobe Cornelius' mansion was built on an elevated piece of land on the end of a sparsely habited street a few minutes' walk from the abandoned Njopongo Airport.

Many inhabitants knew that obtaining a piece of land along Epinde Street these days to build a mansion like the huge monument erected by Lobe, cost a fortune. Lobe had set the standards and only men capable of putting up a building like his could be sold land in that neighbourhood. Even in seventy three when Lobe bought that piece of land measuring eight hundred and sixty square meters from the sons of his former landlord who needed the money to travel abroad, his heavy pockets slacked on the investment. Then, he was the Pay Master of the Marketing Board with all the shady deals that went with his post. A house that would take an average civil servant at least five years to build, assuming he had been belt-tied-saving for over eighteen years, took Lobe Cornelius just fourteen months, two weeks and three days from the day the foundation stone was laid to the day bottles of champagnes were poured on the golden keys. On the day of the inauguration, half of the inhabitants of Njopongo showed up at his gate. Invited or not, they drifted in and hung around, waiting to be permitted in. As it turned out, Lobe's largesse was extended to all present. Thirty minutes into the events, *gate-scratchers* soon realized that their trip hadn't been in vain. They hadn't come to stand and watch the grand house with a double fence and hedges and

lamps on silver stands. They were showed to seats and served food and drinks beyond individual needs.

After the collapse and subsequent closure of the Board, Lobe too went under where he stayed for almost a decade. As was the custom, no servant of the system was ever forsaken forever. In nineteen eighty nine, he was remembered and made the Assistant Post Master. Duty posts infested Lobe like ticks infested an abandoned dog's ears. But unlike the ticks that made a dog gaunt, Lobe's duty posts added extra flesh to his face and trunk. In addition to being a board member of some big parastatals, he was the Managing Director of Seams Incorporated, the incumbent mayor and section president of his party.

At exactly twenty minutes to five, a phone call from the governor himself had dragged Lobe out of a very important budgetary meeting to accompany Mme Rosi-Daniela Kouoh, the Divisional Officer, to the scene of a road accident at Miondo Bar along the Njopongo-Douala highway. The convoy was composed of the commissioner of police, the commandant of the gendarmerie brigade, the mayor and his three assistants, the divisional officer and her assistant and an unnecessary crowd of gendarmes and policemen.

Seven men and four women had died on the spot while an unknown number had been driven to hospitals in Njopongo, Douala and Limbe. After the tour, the mayor had offered his invitation for supper to Rosi-Daniela and excused himself when the convoy reached his end of the road. He wanted to take his drugs, was the excuse he gave. But Rosi-Daniela knew he was tired and thought he had more important issues to take care of than to brood over a few unfortunate victims of life.

After leaving the mayor, she had returned to the office to make a few calls, sign the documents in her pending tray and get her handbag. When she got back to the mayor's house, he was sitting in his huge leather armchair with a wet towel covering his grand belly.

'Welcome Madam.' He made a movement as if to stand but he didn't. 'Please, take a seat.'

Lobe was a tall and huge man, built like the trunk of a baobab. For a neck he had a thick mass of ring between both shoulders on which his head rested.

'What a day!' Lobe said and mopped his brows with one tail of his towel. 'I can see you haven't gone home yet. You have to take it easy, Madam. Real easy.'

Rosi-Daniela looked down at her brown uniform.

'I will remember,' she said with a sigh of weariness.

'How was it in your last station?' Lobe asked. 'Too many problems like in this town? I hear you skinned men like snakes out there in the South.'

'So so and so. There is no place where people live without problems. That is what we are for. Where is your wife?'

'Behind,' Lobe said and smiled guiltily. 'She likes doing things herself. She won't accept to keep a house help.'

'Just like me. They are very helpful but some of us can't stop feeling guilty for not doing the things we consider our pride. But with all the long hours away and the children, we cannot do otherwise.'

Lobe agreed.

'Just the two of you?' Rosi asked, looking around the room. 'You and your wife. No children?'

Lobe's eyes quickly caught the fire of prudence.

'They are all away. U.S, Italy. Only the last one is around.'

'I see. That is one of the nightmares of having children early in life,' Rosi-Daniela said in a meditative voice. 'Just yesterday they were here and today you are alone. When they are younger you shout at them to keep quiet or go to their room so you can listen to the news. But when they grow older, the house becomes unbearably quiet in their absence. Then the TV tends to irritate you as you sit in the living room alone with your old wife or husband.'

Lobe laughed and shook his head.

'That is what life is all about,' he agreed. 'Separation. The seed separates from the man to blend with that of the woman. After nine months, the baby separates from the mother's womb. From then the chain of separation takes up wings.'

At that moment Lobe's wife walked in with two trays in her hands. She was followed by her younger version, a girl of about fifteen with a thick coating of purple lipstick on her full lips. Seeing Lobe's wife, Rosi understood why some people had remarked that she and the mayor's wife looked alike. The mayor's wife was tall, with flesh in the appropriate places like a real African woman. She was the colour of sunned cocoa seed. She wore her hair in plaits, just like Rosi-Daniela. No artificial mesh.

'Welcome, Madam,' Lobe's wife said after she had placed the trays on the dining table away from where Lobe and Rosi sat.

'Good evening Madam Lobe,' Rosi said in response, rising from her seat.

'Celine is the name. Belame Celine. I understand you have been having a bad day today,' Celine said.

'Quite a day!' Rosi confirmed. 'My bones ache.'

'Not easy to manage people,' Celine said.

'Muto, come and say hello to the D.O,' Rosi heard Lobe call out to the young girl who was already heading towards the corridor. The girl paused in her track for a brief second, glanced over her shoulder and then disappeared behind the curtain.

'When my husband called to inform me about the situation,' Celine cut in hastily, 'I imagined the stress you should be in. I asked him to invite you over for dinner.'

'That was quite thoughtful of you,' Rosi said and then realized she was till standing on legs that burnt with fatigue. 'Thank you very much. Quite a beautiful house you have here,' she added as she sat down. 'We are still at the level of the foundation.'

'Thank you,' Celine said. 'It is not easy to build nowadays with the prices of almost everything rising every night. Please, let me get the rest of the food.' She excused herself. 'I will be back in a moment.'

'Lovely woman,' Rosi-Daniela said to Lobe.

Lobe grunted something in response.

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them were sitting on the dining table. Muto might have preferred to eat in her room or in the kitchen.

'I have never witnessed an accident like that before,' Lobe was saying with two long sticks of grilled meat in his hand. 'It makes me loss appetite – with all that blood and pieces of clothes on the road.'

'How did it all happen?' Celine asked as she poured herself a glass of fresh orange juice from a crystal jar.

'Who knows,' Lobe began to say.

'The police, Madam,' Rosi interrupted. 'They had cars sitting on both sides of a highway as though it was a car park.'

'Isn't there a way of stopping all this?' Celine asked innocently. 'I myself I'm tired of those irritating whistles. It has become something of a right. They need to slow down and save face.'

Rosi saw Lobe halt in his chewing and stare in shock at his wife.

'Stop what, Celine?' he asked, looking genuinely embarrassed by his wife's remark which he must be considering naïve and untimely. 'How do you go about stopping it? If you take any of those boys to court, what will you accuse them of? Even if you did find a charge, who is that judge who will rule against them? You are the one who did ecology in school. What we have out there is like your famous food chain that justifies the usefulness of the mosquitoes that won't let me sleep. You remove the *routiers* and policemen from the road, you disrupt a well-established matrix of collective dependence and mutual cooperation. Is it not so Madam Rosa? All those envelopes that change hands

everyday, every week, every month, every year-end. It is a well structured model, like many others that we have running, that needs not be tampered with if anyone wants to keep things smooth for those who value peace and happiness.' He resumed his chewing but the frown of bewilderment stayed in his meaty face.

'What about those people – I mean did many people die?' Celine asked in stubborn persistence.

Lobe dropped the last unfinished stick, took a long swallow from his glass of wine. He was annoyed and unsuccessfully hiding it. He had been heard regretting getting married to the first daughter of a midwife. According to him, his wife's heart was too tender to merit a politician husband. She deserved a reverend pastor or a school teacher for a husband. He had reminded her on several occasions that her soft heart was responsible for the periodic rise in his blood pressure.

'We have no clear records as to who kicked the bucket and who didn't,' Lobe said slowly, licking every word to deliver it as smooth as his racing heart could possibly allow. This wasn't an occasion for them to start one of those loathsome quarrels that left their daughter giggling in her room upstairs. He wiped his mouth expansively. 'Before I and Madam got there, many of them had been shipped away to hospitals and mortuaries depending on the Almighty's roster. And not a single policeman was found in the scene to give us good information on what actually transpired out there. They had all fled. Smart boys!' He laughed boisterously and picked up his unfinished stick of *soya* again. 'Only the park-boys can tell who were the unfortunate souls that were loaded in those cars.'

'No IDs?' Celine inquired.

'A few persons have been Identified.' Rosi replied before Lobe could come out with another of his outrageous responses. 'The police escaped, leaving the scene for pilfers to make away with purses and travelling bags and motor

batteries,' Rosi added in disgust. 'Even rings were pulled off bloody fingers and chains snapped from broken necks.'

'How did you know about all that?' Lobe asked with a grin. He didn't wait for an answer. 'We call that survival of the fittest or collateral damage for those who want to see it as a social ill,' Lobe said with glee.

Rosi-Daniela Kouoh had recently realized that in this town called Njopongo ruled by ruthless men like Lobe, she was in an entirely foreign territory with a difficult working language. There was a mountain of realities she needed to know. What amused her was that Lobe considered himself a competent instructor to put the beardless woman on the correct track. Adamou had let her know that the mayor too was convinced that she was still too puppy-minded to be an administrator. A few bottles of good wine and beer every evening after a delicious bowl of pepper soup goat would trim her mind to understand the working of the local machinery. All she needed was to hang around Godfather Lobe only for a while.

Rosi-Daniela leaned backward in her chair, sipping a glass of orange juice to wet her baking lungs. Now she frowned and put down the glass as another scene hit her mind.

'Madam, it was horrible at the district hospital! ' she said to Celine and grimaced. 'Only five useless nurses. One of them shamelessly informed us that they have instructions not to waste resources unless deposits are paid. And what is that deposit? A hundred and twenty per patient! You should have been there to see those who have been administered the so-called first aid.'

'I almost spanked her red face if not of Madam,' Lobe said.

Rosi smiled and looked down at her crumbled official outfit. She picked up her glass of juice to cover her mouth.

'You should have some of this,' Lobe suggested, offering to pour her a drink from the wine bottle. 'It will do you good.'

Rosi nodded, emptied her glass and reluctantly pushed it across the table. Lobe topped it with wine.

'You needed to see some of the victims,' Rosi said as she took the full glass from Lobe and gazed at the sparkling red liquid in it. 'They slept like corpses with their slimy red clothes sticking tight to their motionless skins. The groans! Got right in here.' She pointed at her chest. 'Almost drove me insane.'

'You have to do something,' Celine said to no one in particular.

Lobe startled as though his wife had suddenly transformed into a wasp and had stung his eye.

'You are right, Madam,' Rosi mumbled, 'except that at this moment I am alone and tired without a husband to hold my head and whisper his suggestions into my ears. Thank God, he has a handful of friends in the medical field. I called a few of them. They have started the rounds already. Some kind of a mobile emergency medical team.'

At that moment Kake and Mulem walked in through the main door.

Lobe coughed as he saw them, looking relieved. There were now more men to dilute the women effect.

'There you are boys!' he shouted amiably, aiming to bring this irritating topic to an end. 'Do join us. Take seats and tell us what knots still need to be tied.'

Kake stared warily at the Divisional Officer. Lobe sensed his hesitation.

'Go on, Boy,' Lobe urged. 'You know our new D.O, don't you?'

'All is set, Sir,' Kake said instead as he sat down, ignoring the mayor's question.

'The only trouble is the Driver's Syndicate,' Mulem grumbled.

'Ah, and what is the issue with those pigs again?' Lobe asked as he filled his glass with wine. 'I thought everyone has been taken care of.'

Again Kake hesitated, not quite sure he had to say this in the presence of an authority like the divisional officer. Then as if summing her up as a harmless woman, he shrugged and spoke out slowly. 'That is exactly where the problem lies. Sadi thinks he will have no part to play in this. He doesn't intend to help us.'

'And what are we doing about it?' Lobe asked, scrutinizing both men with his small bird eyes.

'We are slipping him under the carpet and keeping him there until all is over,' Mulem explained. 'We cannot take the risk of having him around on that day.'

'Perfect! A mouse like him shouldn't be a hard sweep. Bela, please can you get Muto to add more food.'

When his wife had left, Lobe leaned forward towards Rosi, his stomach scrubbing the table.

'We have learnt to keep our enemies too close to our bosom,' he said happily. 'This boy you hear us talking about is getting too many ideas of his apparent importance. He needs to be deflated a bit before the elections if he still insists to be stubborn.'

'What is this all about?' Rosi asked. 'I have been hearing complaints and threats. I was planning to ask you about this election.'

'It is this *okada* group,' Lobe said with a mighty frown on his face. 'They have fabricated a ghost union and want to organize elections on Saturday I think. We can't afford to have those boys get away with what they want. Theirs is a very sensitive case. That is one of the issues I wanted us to discuss this evening. I want to introduce to you the person I will like to have elected as the president of this association of hooligans. Mulem Denis. He is one of us.'

Mulem raised a hand like someone taking an oath of office.

Rosi looked Mulem over.

'Is he an *okadaman*?' she asked.

'Not exactly. He owns a good number of motorcycles. And he is our man.'

'I see,' Rosi said. What she saw in Mulem was trouble in its most raw state.

'No one is indispensable,' Lobe added and slumped back in his chair. 'Even the Pope in Rome dies and is replaced. When ambitious young men begin getting big ideas, the established system needs to cut down on some hours of sleep in order to deal with them.'

Rosi promised herself to remember this although with a slight modification anyway: when greedy men couldn't stop expanding their sphere of dominion, then official restrainers need to put in extra time to find the right chains for them. She had received instructions from Yaoundé regarding the mayor and three other highly placed officials in town. From the instructions received from Yaoundé and from what she had heard from a few reliable voices so far, and from the preliminary results of her own secret investigation, Lobe Mapito wasn't far from a rest room walled with cold iron bars. A cold axe would fall on him very soon. Not long from now.

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I am not about to tell anyone any of these. State secrets remain state secrets. And there is no pride in boasting of your participation in bringing about another man's ruin no matter how many necks he might have broken in order to get up to where he now comfortably sat.

In our life, we have all erred in one way or another. And the lucky ones among us who have been methodically chastised early before they could grow wild and run faster than the wind of redemption, ended up becoming men and

women unafraid to lift their heads and speak out encouraging words to the community.

There are however, some hands that break the spirit and sap every drop of hope when they reprimand. And I think Lobe's hand is one of those that bruise the soul. It is for this reason that I turn my attention back to his niece.

'Miss Atam,' I call. 'Coming back to the day you left your uncle's house. Where did you go to?'

'I went to his place,' she pointed by lifting her chin towards Sadi.

'After the accident?' I ask.

'I didn't know he had had an accident,' she replies.

'I see. Do you want to talk about it? I mean your encounter with him.'

She looks at Sadi as if to gauge his reaction. But Sadi has taken off again in another of his long-distance flight, leaving only a lame ear behind.

She nods slowly.

6

The creation mission wasn't delivered with strings, Granny Joki Dibomba once said. Go ye forth into the whole wide world and multiply, was the simple instruction. No conditions hooked to it. No hidden traps. Just a free send-off into the wide green world.

Yet Atam Sirri today found herself fiercely poked and pierced and clobbered for her fulfilment of this mission. She was suddenly alone in her paradise magically turned stony, thorny and terribly slippery. All because she refused to dutifully succumb to the illogical grading system on the valuation of man's worth imposed by the society on everyone. Eyambe Cyprene of the Delegation of Agriculture almost plucked the eyes off his daughter's head for refusing to get married to a man who was the son of a renowned judge who had all the powers to turn the heaviest tables around for the good of Eyambe's family anytime they were in need of his help. Solange Ebude Kang, whose mother was a parliamentarian, was shut in their villa in Bomaka for four months to get her love-addicted mind used to the idea of no longer seeing Bertrand-the-soya-man whose mother fried puffballs beside Kittens in Molyko.

That was the rule. So-so-and-so girl must by every means abort to avoid bringing shame to her parents after getting pregnant out of wedlock, especially to that so-so-and-so boy living at the end of that abandoned street. In flat words, a girl hardly had a meaningful voice when it came to picking a life partner. She was praised if she luckily stumbled on her parents' dream man. If not, she was expected to naturally run back to society's drawing board and start all over again in redesigning her choice. Or she could riskily stand against her people like a wall of old bricks and bear the blows of the ferocious winds of scorn and rejection, the tormenting insults

and meanness of her once-beloved family, all the rest of her life.

On what basis did the society build these principles? Sirri asked herself as she laid on Sadi's bed with the sheets pulled up to her neck and watched Sadi finish putting on his worn out jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. Last night she had let herself in to the empty apartment with her own key, dragging her valise behind her, hoping he would be in before eight. As tired as she had been with a simmering heart that kept resurfacing all her troubles, she had fallen asleep in the cane sofa in the living room, had a few horrible nightmares and had only been awoken by the barks of a dog outside directly below the window. She had dragged her feet to the room and looked dazedly around – it was useless because Sadi couldn't have returned and left her in the sofa – not Sadi. She had began to be worried. Worst of all there was no way of knowing where he was. Sadi had no cell phone.

Maybe he had travelled to see his father, she had conveniently concluded. Whenever he visited the old man, he spent at least two days.

She had moved herself to the bed and fallen asleep again, but not before she had worked her mind over and over her troubles for about an hour. He finally came in at exactly four-twenty in the morning smelling of filth like a butcher's hand towel. Sirri was wide awake but still lying in bed making living images out of the brown patterns moisture had drawn on the ceiling boards. Her heart jumped when he levelled her one cold, strained and weary look. Yet she managed to smile and say, good morning. Sadi uttered a feeble good morning in return. She followed his gaze as he glanced at her valise with that same blank stare and then, without another word, he headed straight for the bathroom, peeling the remnants of his shirt and trousers and dropping them behind him as he went. The customary humming that often accompanied his bath was stolen from his lips that morning. Sirri wondered what had snatched away his liveliness.

His unusual quietude resonated like a church bell in a still dawn filling the entire room with his unspoken fear plus whatever worries that now creased his brows. Sirri knew he suspected she had come with a load of troubles symbolized in her huge travelling bag sitting beside his wardrobe. He was trying hard to retard the confirmation of whatever suspicion his mind might have created.

Now he came over to the bed and reached for his wallet from under the pillow. At that moment Sirri felt as to grab his neck and pull him down on her. But she resisted the urge. As he took out the wallet, a few coins fell off with clinking sounds and rolled on the floor. Sadi grunted as he stooped and picked them up. He shoved the coins into his pocket like two trouble-shooters deserving perpetual incarceration. He flipped through whatever was contained in the wallet with a worried frown in his face and then grunted deeply as he thrust it into the back pocket of his trousers.

Sirri eyed him go through these motions and felt a sudden surge of motherly attraction towards her man. Sadi was a lone child who had to wrestle life to survive. He never knew his mother. His only blood relation was a father he loved so dearly. Then there was his second lover – the bus – that seemed to fall gravely ill almost every week, making it practically impossible for Sadi to save any money for himself. She was certain that the bus had broken down again, stealing away a chunk of his habitual sense of humour. He was twenty nine and already had stress lines around the edges of his eyes.

At the garage a month before, Sirri had handed him four hundred and twenty thousand francs, the total amount of money Auntie Belame had given her to give to Pa Atam who wanted to pay an advance for a house in Mukunda. According to Auntie Belame's story, there was a house in Mukunda whose owner was returning to his home country Nigeria and Pa Atam thought it was a good opportunity for the Lobes to own a village rest house away from the hassle of town life. They needed a place to retreat to whenever they felt

as to escape from the suffocating heat and dust of town life. Auntie Belame said she didn't want her husband to know she was buying a house. She would offer it as a gift to her husband on his fourth anniversary as Mayor.

This was supposed to be a family investment. Why would Auntie want to keep it from her husband when he might end up hating the deal after all? And why hadn't she taken the money herself to Mukunda when she was hardly occupied? Why did she hint that Sirri could get Sadi to take her to Mukunda when they had three cars and a driver who knew Mukunda inside out?

Sirri had arrived at the logical conclusion that somehow Auntie Belame knew about Sadi's predicament and was sending a veiled assistance, knowing Sadi's pride wouldn't let him accept a gift from the Lobes. Within the last few months, a cold war had quickly evolved between Sadi and Uncle Lobe over Sadi's relationship with Sirri. Lobe once called him a cunning opportunist scanning around for a purse to dip his filthy fingers into. Sirri knew Sadi would rather starve than ask for help from her or any woman.

With this in mind, she too had gone along with Auntie Belame's secret scheme. She had doctored her aunt's story a bit. She told Sadi her uncle wanted her to take the ACCA program to supplement her First Degree and had given her the money as part fees. Since registration wasn't due until April the following year and she didn't want to leave the money with her uncle, she thought Sadi could help her keep it until it was needed.

At this moment, Sirri couldn't accurately ascertain what was in Sadi's mind. He looked so distant and somehow frightened. He looked like a man who was in the glaring lights of a reality he would rather wish was a passing nightmare. Whatever worried him, he would come over it soon especially after he heard the news she had stowed away for him.

'Come over, Big Sadi,' she said and patted the bed, indicating just where she wanted him to sit.

Sadi pretended not to have heard.

Pride and an undue feeling of guilt! Sirri thought.

'I have great news for you,' Sirri said, tapping the bed again. 'Here, sit down.'

Sadi eyed her suspiciously before walking over to the bed like a cautious rat. Sirri caught his wrist and dragged him down.

Sadi mumbled something as he fell on the bed and laid his head on her laps. Sirri stroke his head tenderly. He didn't try to get up.

'What will you give me after I tell you our secret?' she asked. She thought she felt his heavy breathing stop for a second. His body tensed.

'Our secret!' Sadi mumbled. It wasn't a question but a note of acknowledgement of a scary truth.

Sirri smiled.

Sadi glanced at his wrist watch. 'I have to go. I must be there.' Yet, he didn't get up.

'You only just came in,' Sirri reminded him, smoothing the front of his shirt.

She felt him relax and mistakenly took it for a victory. Here is my man, Sirri told herself. He was coming out slowly like a tortoise.

'I missed you last night,' she told him truthfully, '– with the dog barking right in my head and the chirping of crickets – '

Sadi glanced sideways at her face and then quickly shifted his gaze to the wall once painted sky-blue but now brown and grey in places where the paint had peeled off.

'Your uncle has at last thrown you out.' It wasn't a question. He swallowed hard. 'What else do you have to say?' he asked. 'That I can now take you as a free gift of nature, no price, no *khatah*, nothing?' He was getting angry.

Sirri smiled and looked up at the ceiling boards.

'We shall need bigger space,' she said instead, 'a more spacious house with a big living room and veranda for our child to play around.'

Sadi turned his head slowly as though afraid to snap a tender cord in his neck.

'Yes, I am pregnant. Two months.'

Sadi bolted off her, gaping in shock down at the half smile on her face.

Sirri raised herself on an elbow planted on the bed with her chin in her palm. With the other hand she raised the pillow slightly and brought out the famous yellow booklet that had given her no smaller headache lately and waved it across his sullen face.

Sadi was now on his feet.

'Take and look!'

His face was ashen with disbelieve. He looked as though he would faint as he clutched the booklet without looking at it.

'Wonderful news,' he said after a while with thick sarcasm that made a chill crawl down Sirri's arms. She saw him take three long strides to the cane cupboard beside the open window, the booklet still in his hand as though he had forgotten he held it. The next moment he was heading for the door. Sirri flung the sheets away, jumped out of bed and seized his hand.

'Take your hands off me,' Sadi hissed.

'I know how you feel, but I promise you we shall come out of this in one piece,' Sirri said, attempting a lame assurance.

'You know how I feel – really?' Sadi snapped back. 'You think you know?'

Sirri nodded without much conviction.

'No you don't. Now let me tell you how I feel – like a rat thrown into a cage to serve as company to a bad-tempered black cat. And you know what? Just when I thought I was getting my head out to avoid seeing my head crushed, the

police, the accident and . . . and you bring down the sledgehammer.'

'I didn't plan for this.'

'Really!'

'Yes. Sadi, please listen. Like you, my thoughts too never strayed to that direction – we are simply victims of the weaving fingers of fate –'

'I refuse to be a victim, Atam,' Sadi shouted. 'Your uncle says I am a dirty rag the dogs dragged to his doorsteps. He vowed to do his most to rake me up and have me deposited safely in a waste heap far from human habitation. Now he doesn't need to waste his energy. Fate might have made me a rickety bus driver but please, while I try hard to accept my allotment, do not mock at my efforts. Please, Sirri, don't. You have done your part. But this!'

'Look, Sadi, you are being extremely unreasonable,' Sirri said sternly and sat on the bed.

'Am I?'

'Yes! I lost the chance of furthering my studies because of you – because my uncle thinks that at my age I still don't have a head to know what is right for me. I couldn't survive his regular mouth-lashing any longer and had to leave his house – a decision that will split my family into two conflicting camps when my parents will receive the news. And what do you say to me today? What comforting words am I eating from your lips?'

Sadi was now leaning on the window frame and looking out.

'Tell me why I deserve this,' Sirri said, her voice rising against her wish.

Sadi turned around. 'I think I told you about three weeks ago that your uncle is right. Who am I to love the niece of the Almighty Managing Director of Seams? Who am I to be the mayor's son-in-law? Your class is far up there in the sky.' He raised both hands towards the ceiling.

'Three weeks ago, you say?' Sirri yelled. 'After I found out that I am carrying our child – God gracious!'

'You think you can add more misery into my life with a child, don't you?' Sadi screamed back at the top of his voice and scolded at the booklet he was still holding as if it carried a deadly plague. Then in a flash, he flung it across the room, the pages thrashing the air miserably before falling with a soft thud beside Sirri's valise. Sirri jumped as Sadi punched the wall in a mad rage. It was as though he was possessed by some evil spirit of thoughtlessness.

Sirri couldn't remember seeing him this angry. Never had his voice been raised to the hearing of neighbours even under joyous circumstances. He was only noted for talking aloud while addressing his crowd of car drivers. And that was because drivers were a noisy bunch. He had to raise his voice in order to be heard above an excited group. But never in the privacy of his home did he scream at anyone. Looking at him this morning with frightful eyes, Sirri felt that there was something else that was chopping into her man's shoulders. It couldn't just be the news of her pregnancy and her uncle's attitude towards him. As he rightly said, she might have brought down the sledgehammer at the worst time.

'Everyone has joined in a fierce contest to pull me down!' he said in a resigned tone of voice. 'God and men alike. And what is most aching is that everyone is almost succeeding in their noble task,' Sadi muttered, panting like a chased duck. He looked as though tears weren't far away. How weird it might be to see him cry, Sirri imagined for a split second and immediately shook the idea away.

'What has suddenly come over you?' Sirri asked calmly, getting up from the bed again and walking towards him. 'Can you sit down and tell me where I can find my Sadi? Who is this unreasonable and rude man roaring at me? My God, who are you? What has come over you, Sah?'

'You want to know what has come over me, eh? It's you and the likes of Lobe and that other rough bunch of thieves

planted along our roads. I have just realized that I should have moved house a long time ago. I am crushed now – a shredded rag. A baby! God! Who gave you that cruel idea?'

'What idea in God's name?' Sirri too was getting mad with rage. Why wouldn't Sadi try to see how hurt she too was? 'Why are you doing this to me, Sah?'

'You have the courage to accuse me of hurting you, eh? After your almighty uncle blacklisted me in the books of all his friends scattered in the length and breadth of the country, don't you think I need to regain my breath? Don't you think I deserve some peace? All I could manage to own was an old bus. Now even that too is gone. Yes, gone!'

Sirri didn't understand. She couldn't make any sense out of this.

'You are quite a creator, Man,' she said, shaking her head in bewilderment. 'But this time your fertile imagination has come up with a lame and ugly creation.' She clasped her hands together, trying hard to remain calm. 'My uncle is influential enough to bring your efforts to naught. This I know. He is sometimes selfish and thinks that the rich mustn't have anything in common with honest, hardworking and humble persons. This also I am aware of. But I also know another thing – every man has a limited power over the life of anyone else. Even the devil knows his limit. I know that my uncle is not that mean to dig so deep to ruin you. So stop tormenting yourself with such crazy thoughts.'

'Me! Having crazy thoughts!' Sadi barked. 'Now listen to the summary of my crazy imaginations. To begin with, I am tired of being a target of the stones thrown about by the rich and powerful. And then, I am not worthy to father a child by you. I am unable even to feed myself. I don't deserve you. Do you get that? I DON'T DESERVE YOU! If this is all a joke, then thank your stars that it ended up revealing to you what I truly think of our relationship – a cold and dark cul-de-sac.'

'Taking away the joke option, what remains?' Sirri asked, this time submerged to the neck with rage. Her throat was bursting with a lump of anger.

'Go get married to your uncle and raise your child in a mansion that befits your offspring. That is the remaining option.' He matched to the door and stopped.

'And thank Madam Belame for the money – I believe you never thought that I will ever find out.' He added before walking out of the room and slamming the door after him.

Sirri burst into tears.

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I let out a long sigh and look at Sadi. He is chewing his teeth and his eyes are gleaming with the sure signs of guilt.

'I am sorry,' he says almost inaudibly as though he is speaking to himself. 'I didn't mean to be rude. But it was all too much to bear.'

'You people will have enough time to talk this out later,' I step in quickly to help them conserve that beautiful magic moment of private apology.

'You only came back home the next morning following the accident. Where were you?' I ask Sadi.

Sadi stares at me as though I am supposed to know the answer. I stare back at him. Maybe he is admiring my lifeless eyes. But I need an answer.

'We took Aza and the others to the hospital,' he says. 'Then I took his phone and called his brother but the nurse on duty couldn't reach the doctor. The man got annoyed and we took Aza to Douala.'

'That same night?' I ask.

'That same night. We got to Douala at about nine. He regained consciousness at two in the morning.'

Then you came back home, after a sleepless night waiting on a patient, bathe and left right away because you couldn't stand your pregnant girlfriend, I say to myself.

'And the camera, you gave it to his brother?'

He opens his mouth to say something and then closes it again. He doesn't want to talk about the camera. He doesn't know I have been working with similar images from Azania for almost two years now.

'Okay, where did you go to after you left this lady in your room?' I ask.

'To the garage to get a friend to help me tow the bus to his place,' Sadi says and shakes his head sadly. 'It was useless anyway. Before we got there, they have stripped and stolen everything from the batteries to the chairs.'

'Don't worry about that,' I tell him carelessly. 'I know those who did that part of the *rough work*, as you guys call it. That is being taken care of.' I see Sadi's mouth shoot open for a brief moment and then snap shut like a crocodile's.

'Anyway, it is still useless,' he concludes.

'As far as you are concerned, yes,' I tell him. 'So you and that friend went back to Miondo Bar to tow the car that morning?'

'Yes,' Sadi says slowly. 'And then we stopped at Big Buggie's for a bottle of beer.'

7

It had been approximately two hours since it reluctantly stopped drizzling and the air was still thick with the cold wind now blowing in through the windows of Jet2 whose louvers Big Buggie Matts had resigned replacing. The inner walls of the drinking spot carried the marks of the multiple fights that had taken place within that square room under the amused eyes and encouragement of the bartender and owner, Big Buggie himself. Even from the outside, Jet2 didn't hide its broken windows and split wood on the door panel that appeared like scars on a famous boxer's face.

Big Buggie was a chunk of a man, build like a wedge, a strong violence addict. He had a bushy moustache and a glass-sparkling bald head. It was said that he began fighting for money during break time when he was still in primary two and had carried on his hobby to the gambling quarters in rusty twenty-foot containers abandoned under the mangoes trees behind the defunct TASHA Ltd. When Ebong Mathias later on bought over the TASHA Ltd property, and set up the imposing furniture shop SPLENDID WOODS, Buggie and his cronies moved their activities along the stretch of highway between the Njopongo Roundabout and Campo College Hill. There, they preyed on those greedy men and women in luxury cars dying to double their stolen wealth overnight at all cost. They stopped cars and told the occupants stories of treasure boxes full of raw bank notes worth hundreds of millions that needed only a small quantity of mercury the value of a few million francs to wash in order to render them authentic.

It was widely believed that Big Buggie was forced to retire after two of his gang members went too far by murdering a trader for a suitcase that ended up containing sachets of slim-

tea. Those arrested by the mob were tugged into motor tires and set ablaze in front of Moquo Onion Market. Big Buggie went under for seven months and resurfaced to open Jet2. Running Jet2 was his only occupation which, most often, was a boring pastime without a beef of quarrels. As there was time for everything, his high moments always came at the end of the month. That was a period when Big Buggie actually wore a permanent smile in his small, bright and calculating eyes. He relished the general ambience in his off-license especially after the workers had received their salaries and came to consume their portion of the pay before taking the rest home (for those who didn't squander every franc).

A month hardly went by without a brutal fight in Jet2 resulting in broken chairs and bottles and bleeding heads. During such fights in which chairs and bottles were flung about, when a target was missed, the broad windows with rusty iron rods dutifully intercepted the blows. Big Buggie welcomed these fights and showed his support by offering a round of beer to everyone present after a fierce fight had been successfully quelled with at least a victim rushed away for medical attention. He was known to cherish the sight of blood. If nobody was hurt, Buggie shared no drinks. He stayed behind his counter and sulked. He obviously saw those frequent uproars as some effective form of publicity. His joint was sometimes referred to as the *Mberes' Corner* as it was notoriously attractive to men in uniform like Commissioner Ntoko Linus and his boys who often got steeped in some of the arguments that resulted in fights. They became deaf and blind when the quarrels began and conveniently sneaked away before the fights inadvertently erupted, and only returned to perform the arrests.

Jet2 was a favourite spot for people seeking a pinch of action to spice an otherwise tranquil and monotonous life – just like Buggie's. However, Sadi wasn't here today in search of any kind of action. His crushed bus had been plundered and skinned. Kondeka Shadrack had helped him tow the

wreck to his garage. Sadi didn't mind to share a drink after the hard work. After all, food and drink were among the most precious things that a corps took down with it to the grave.

Sadi wandered lazily away from the counter to one of the empty tables with two cold bottles of Castel Beer, one for Shaddy and the other for himself.

'What a selfish rainy season,' Shaddy said and sniffed his greasy hands.

'It will be over soon,' Sadi said as he sat down in one of the iron chairs and pushed one of the bottles towards Shaddy.

'You really think so?' Shaddy asked without expecting a respond. 'It now rains every day. Since Monday, we have seen no real sunshine. The gutter beside my house will soon overflow into my parlour. And the landlord doesn't care. He only appears at the end of the month.'

Shaddy looked around again curiously and then tapped his finger on the table to draw Sadi's attention. 'What a pleasant surprise,' he said in a whisper. 'All the bad angels are away on mission and old Lucifer looks bored in his desolate kingdom.'

And really, apart from stout Buggie slumped forward behind the counter and venting the frustration of a boring day by frowning down at the pages of a pile of horseracing magazines scattered in front of him, there were only two other persons – one photo album hawker lying on a bench beside the door fast asleep with a bundle of photo-albums resting on his chest and clasped with both hands. A man dressed in a cheap ash-coloured suit was sitting three tables away from Buggie's counter, grinning at the five empty bottles of large Guinness standing between his elbows. The drunk man's elbows were planted firmly on the table and his frail hands hugged his jaws.

Sadi understood why Big Buggie had roughly pushed the drinks across the counter without his habitual chilling smile and the words, *a coolant for the soul against the flame on the other side, Petit Mbenga*, but had immediately returned his attention

to the magazines. Then he remembered that the month was already old and many pockets were empty. Payday was more than a week away and Sadi was thankful for that. Only Shaddy was sitting close to him. He was too conscious of the stench of grease and sweat that escaped from every pore in his body. He felt exhausted and his spinal column and neck ached after all the heaving and tugging they had done under the rain all morning right up to the early hours of the afternoon. Now that the work was over and the wreck was safe in Shaddy's garage, a feeling of emptiness filled Sadi's heart. He had no other option but to find a new starting point. He had to start afresh at last.

'Things will get better,' he mumbled doubtfully and dipped his greasy fingers into the pocket of his equally greasy jeans and pulled out a few bank notes and some coins from his wallet. He spread the money on his palms and did a slow count.

'Four thousand eight hundred and fifty,' he muttered and smiled. This was all that was left on him. He hadn't paid for the drinks yet.

And he had eaten nothing since leaving his house in the morning.

He could feel Shaddy's eyes following his moves.

As though sharing Sadi's thought, Shaddy said, 'Since morning, only a quarter of a piece of bread and fried groundnuts. If those Igbo women are gone, I will die.'

'Not after a bottle and all the bread and groundnut you ate today,' Sadi said. 'You have enough food in you to keep you till morning.'

'It is only six thirty,' Shaddy complained moodily.

'Where do you keep all the food you eat?' Sadi asked. Shaddy couldn't weigh more than fifty five kilograms. He was a smallish man whose feet barely touched the ground as he sat on one of Buggie's high chairs. Within the last four hours they were together, he had eaten one Kumba bread and drank a litter of coca cola. Shaddy didn't count the small plastic bags

of boiled groundnuts and maize cobs that he picked from a provision store across the road at Miondo Bar each time he wanted to *stretch* his body.

'Here,' Shaddy said, tapping his hairy head. 'This is where all the food enters and it is never enough. This head works like a jackass and deserves to be well fed.'

Sadi didn't find anything to say to this.

'Can you imagine that it was with one of these things that Akpan spanked Esono's head!' Shaddy said and tapped his knuckles against the edge of the metal chair on which he sat. He seemed to be looking for an topic that would take Sadi's thoughts away from his problems.

Sadi shuddered and sipped his drink in silence and found his mind slowly nibbling again into his problems. How much a worried father's tongue could do!

'I hope you agree?' Sadi heard Shaddy say.

'Humn!' Sadi said, his eyes bearing a pathetic look. 'Sorry I didn't hear what you said.'

'So I have been talking to myself?' Shaddy asked accusingly. While Sadi was thinking of his finances, Shaddy had been describing the last fight that took place in Jet2 last Sunday night – a fight that broke the long fluorescent lamp above the door.

'I am sorry, Shaddy,' Sadi mumbled. 'You know I just cannot think straight today.'

'Then find a ruler. I am sorry too that for all the years we have known each other, I am still not trusted enough to partake in you worries, President,' Shaddy said and seeped his drink. 'Since morning, you have been frowning and talking to yourself and being dangerously careless. See, my younger sister made me almost sell my house when she fell sick. I spent every franc I had, got my thin neck hooked tight in a debt hole. She died with packets of drugs worth over two hundred thousand lying on her side table. And I had to pay an additional ninety thousand francs before I could get her corpse out of the hospital. In the village they accused me of

selling her and abandoned her corpse for me to bury alone – the grave, the coffin, the food and drinks for an entire village. But I survived. Here I am still alive and strong and determined more than ever before to end this life a rich man.' He began to laugh as though the thought of becoming rich was unbearably amusing.

Both men laughed for a while and then lapsed into a moment of silence, each with thoughts of their own.

'Sirri is pregnant,' Sadi said crisply, breaking the silence.

Shaddy started.

'Congratulations!' He finally said when he found his voice. His eyes, however, were fixed on his bottle. Receiving no response from Sadi, he looked up and asked, 'What is her uncle saying about it? I mean, does the mayor know yet?' he sounded apprehensive.

'He knows,' Sadi said, 'What he thinks is the least of my worries.'

'Thank God,' Shaddy said and held his bottle of beer tight as though extracting inspiration from the moist surface.

'You just have to accept it and start planning for the days ahead. Pregnancy is not something a man like you, despite your difficult situation, should run away from. Poor girl! Where is she now? Still at her uncle's place?'

'She is at my place. Since last night.'

'I see! So Mr. Lobe threw her out. Not surprised at all. These big people hate us like we hate the mice that live under our bed. You will marry her, President. You must! She is such a beautiful and nice girl. You just have to stop dreaming.'

Sadi almost smiled. 'Have I been dreaming?' He asked. 'About what and when and how do you know?'

Kondeka Shadrack moved his chair closer and leaned forward over the table. 'You seem to be too honest, thinking that you can survive all on your own without a push from a few persons. Like a mole, you have consciously or accidentally been caught in a trap in a successful groundnut farm. Have a few mouthfuls before you die. It is my advice.

Fill your mouth first and wait for the rest. Who knows? In trying to get you out of the trap and into his bag, the hunter may fumble and let you free.'

Shaddy gulped down a few mouthfuls from his bottle, smacked his lips and blinked out imaginary tears.

'See, for example, that little secret I told you the other day of the money Lobe's wife sent to you through that girl,' Shaddy went on to say. 'You didn't go begging for it. Even if you did beg, what is wrong with that? God made some rich and the rest poor so that the poor should pester the rich with their endless demands. The poor survive through begging. The rich grow fat from complaining all the time about the begging habit of the poor. Even those who don't give must complain of constantly giving in order to look important in the eyes of the society. We simply play our role. Be a determined and courageous, shameless beggar. Did I tell you what happened to me the other day?'

'Wait a minute, Shaddy. I agree that we all have roles to play in life. But I don't like to be deceived. I don't want anyone to feel that without him, I am worst than dead.'

Shaddy raised his hand. 'Do you know what I call that?' he asked sharply. 'I call that pride, Grand Sadi. Unproductive pride. And everyone has the right to keep theirs. I am older than you for many years. Forget about my small size and look instead at this head.' He bent his head to point at a spot in the middle where some hair had fallen off. 'What I am advising you as my small brother and friend is that you should be a bit flexible and give nature the chance to solve some problems for you. That's all. No one losses a hair in the process.'

'I will remember that,' Sadi said. 'Presently I am confused. The thought of having a child now had never crossed my mind.'

'But you once told me your old man is ringing a bell in your ear to get married.'

'Yes, but not like this. Not at this time – I don't even know her real parents. Where do I start?'

'From the beginning,' Shaddy said and eyed his half-empty bottle. 'I have the feeling you shouted at her before leaving the house this morning. Am I right?'

Sadi gawked. 'Who told you?'

'Too bad!' Shaddy said and shook his head. 'Walls have ears. When you get home today, take her in your arms and reassure her that all will be fine. Relationships like this last longer when they are properly managed from the start. Try to avoid giving the tongue a bad taste now. Don't give her any reason to nurse regret. You never know!' Shaddy said sternly.

'I don't know . . .'

'You know everything. Just do what I ask you to do. You will always reflect on past moments like these and reconfirm how valuable your partner is to your life. Today you may be a poor driver kept on his feet by a thread of hope. Who knows tomorrow?'

'I am no longer a driver,' Sadi said as a reminder to himself and Shaddy. 'Even that too has been taken from me.'

'What was initially taken from you?' Shaddy asked and sipped his drink.

'I don't know really,' Sadi said and shook his heard tiredly and stared at his untouched bottle. 'I just feel empty. Need some rest to think things through.'

'Drink, President,' Shaddy urged. 'What has happened has happened. The only effective remedy as you once told us at the roundabout one day is a radical march forward with a stony conviction that time will help in healing those sores of misunderstandings and hatred – and hardship as well. Do you remember saying those words?'

Sadi clenched his jaws and found his mind somersaulting twelve kilometres away to the old fisherman back in Njok. These were old Mbenga Matindi's words which Sadi had borrowed to use in his campaigns.

Now Sadi didn't only have a girl, but a girl with a baby due in under seven months. On hearing the news, Mbenga Matindi would certainly march out, his hands buried deep inside his trousers' pockets, and gather his friends on a drinking spree. He would only return to his quiet little home late in the night conveniently drunk and fuelled for a hectic, lonely Makossa dance.

'May God preserve him to see me through this one,' Sadi said of his father and smiled again. 'I know things will get better although I don't know how this will come about,' he said, nodding his head. 'You deserve to rest at this age. You are too old to be going down to the river every night to fish.' He addressed the bottle of beer on the table seemingly representing his father at that moment.

'Things will get better,' Shaddy reaffirmed and lifted his bottle to his mouth, surely wondering if Sadi had gone mad. 'Just go home to your father and spend a few days. Who knows? You might end up realizing that his suggestion isn't as terrible as you think. And looking at the facts in the face, you don't seem to have a choice.'

Sadi nodded and then shrugged.

'I will talk to her first.'

'Good idea. You two can take a break – I mean you and that girl . . . what is her name again?'

'Sirri, Atam Sirri,' Sadi said.

'Have you thought of leaving this town with her for a short while? Some kind of a holiday in Njok especially now that she has a split with her uncle. Away from me and all this *wahala*. You are lucky, Presi. Don't mess this up.'

'How I wish I am as lucky as you,' a voice whispered in Sadi's ear and firm fingers dug into his left shoulder. He turned and looked up at Kake Mulopo staring down at him with that cocky smile that seemed to hide sacks of venom somewhere between or inside those white teeth.

Standing beside Kake was Mulem Denis, with his callous plumber's fingers hooking his belt. These two again?

Big Buggie was already humming a tune.

'Yes, we have come again, Mr. Sadi!' Kake Mulopo said. 'For once hell is cold,' Kake remarked looking around the room. 'Only Stocky Lucifer himself tied behind his witness stand.' He was referring to Big Buggie.

Sadi sipped his beer without saying a word. Kondeka Shadrack bowed his head and placed his hands on his nape.

'Won't you invite us to sit down?' Kake asked.

'I don't own the place,' Sadi replied. Their presence announced trouble. Sadi thought he could smell it.

'Out for greasing?' Buggie called from the counter.

'Shut up!' Mulem shouted at the barman.

'Sorry Sah,' Buggie said happily and went on humming, this time louder.

'What do you want again?' Sadi demanded.

Kake smiled and walked around the table to face him. 'We heard your sad news,' he said in a low tone. 'We are very sorry. That is how life is – full of ups and downs.'

Kake sounded as though they had come to condole with Sadi over the death of a beloved relation.

'We thought we could come and give a helping hand to get you back to your feet. Just a little hand of friendship, no harm,' Mulem spoke out. His voice sounded like the gritting of the rusty hinges of a door in an old abandoned farm house. But he looked about ready to lift Sadi together with the table and throw them out of the door should Sadi utter an unacceptable word.

After all these years of walking beside Kake, Mulem hadn't learned the art of smooth speaking, Sadi thought. He regarded his dirty fingers for a long while. He hated being pinned in a corner. And this was a filthy hot corner Mulem and Kake had placed him.

During the last twin elections, the big guns of Union for Change had contacted him to help them win the Council and the two parliamentary seats. For twenty one days and nights, Sadi didn't sleep, mobilizing all the taxi men, motorcycle

riders, bus drivers and even truck pushers, telling them Njopongo needed effective change which could only be guaranteed by voting the UC list. He campaigned for free, most of the time borrowing money from Sirri to fuel his bus to do the necessary runs. It was clear that with the drivers and traders behind Ntamark Cyprian, the UC Party was poised for a landslide victory.

On the eve of the elections, Sadi was checking the carburettor of his bus when the boys began flocking into his compound, with Shaddy in the lead.

'No voters' cards! Can you imagine?' Shaddy had shouted from the zinc gate as he trooped in with his crowd of mobilized voters. It was only then that Sadi realized that he too hadn't been given a voter's card. He had personally managed the registration process, from mobilizing reluctant members of the drivers' syndicate to taking down their identification details and handing a finished list to members of the electoral committee. It was close to a miracle that none of the boys was issued a voter's card.

He had calmed them down and called Ntamark, using Shaddy's cell phone. Ntamark had suggested that they should all make themselves available at the pooling stations the next day with their national identity cards. He must have hoped that their names would be in the voters' list. But on Election Day proper, none of the names appeared in the voters' list. Sadi's heart was swollen with frustration. Realizing that it was useless and outright risky to start an argument at the pooling station with all those dark-faced military men scattered all over the place with loaded rifles and grenades and truncheons and firm instructions to beat up, shot, and maim anyone who intended to disrupt the peace of the day, Sadi had climbed on the elevated platform from where the headmaster addressed the pupils during morning devotion. His intention had been to call his boys to order. He could see some of them already pocking their fingers through the windows and shouting at the members of the electoral commission.

Probably identifying him as the ringleader, two military men had fallen on him like an active beehive with their truncheons and teargas. In less than a minute he was out. His unconscious body was bundled together with nine others and dumped into the back of a black and ugly looking truck covered with a deep-green tarpaulin. Sadi had spent the rest of the day unconscious. It was later in the night, regaining consciousness and stirring with aching bones and a throbbing head that he saw, through the narrow slits in his swollen eyes, his father staring down at him from a chair beside his bed. He was lying in his father's bed in their home in Njok.

He wasn't surprised to hear the next day that the Voice of the People Party, won both elections with a screaming ninety-three percent. In a feeble position like his, all he could do was to solemnly resolve to have nothing to do with the electoral process. Never again. Even when the UC had filed a petition to the Supreme Court on elections malpractices, Sadi had waved that to the back of his mind. No more politics for him.

Now this NMORA business!

Just then Buggie called out, 'Mulem the Cone, I bring something for wet throat?' Buggie must have noticed the growing tension building amongst the men and wanted to warm up some nerves. Who knows? Some real action might come out of it to cheer the evening.

'No, Buggie,' Kake said, 'We are okay. Will drink later.'

'As you say.' Buggie sounded disappointed but hopeful.

Shaddy stood up, emptied the last drops of beer. 'Presi, here are the keys,' he said and pushed his car keys towards Sadi. 'You can be using the car for now. Let me settle the bill. After I cool my body and eat something, I shall be at Squick's place for the wake-keeping.'

Sadi nodded. 'Thank you Shaddy. I will meet you at Squick's. Thank you very much.'

'Let's say nine, nine thirty.'

'Okay, Shaddy, nine thirty.'

Shaddy walked over to the counter, paid for their drinks and went out into the night.

Kake pulled back the chair on which Shaddy had sat and sat down. 'Come on President, we haven't come here for a fight,' Kake said to Sadi in a whisper.

Mulem took two steps backward, folded his arms across his broad gorilla-like chest.

'We are just from your house where one of your neighbours informed us she saw your bus being dragged down this way,' Kake said. 'To be truthful, I personally think it is time you throw that *jagajaga* thing away and get yourself into a better business. Being a bus driver, even as President of the Njopongo syndicate can't get you on the real top where you belong.'

'Thanks for your concern but I don't think you came here to talk about my bus,' Sadi said and wondered where Sirri might have gone to when these two drones flew to his house. For the umpteenth time, he cursed himself for saying all those stupid words to her.

'No, of course not,' Kake said hastily. 'We came because . . . you know the final day is less than forty eight hours away. We are sorry about what happened the other day. As we are speaking, Esunge is assembling some members of your executive who have to assist you on that day. Sorry we did not seek your authorization. But, as I told Denis, you won't mind. We thought since it is getting too late it will be but wise to help you do the necessary arrangements. You understand that we can't afford to fail. We . . . '

'Please, spare me the sermon and tell me what you want,' Sadi said, holding on to his famous frown. He knew why they had come – to continue what they had been unable to accomplish in his house.

Kake cleared his throat with a deep cough. He placed both hands on the table in front of him and said slowly, calling Sadi by the nickname used by his driver colleagues and passengers, 'You see, Grand Sah, after sending us out of your

house, we have been thinking. You had a good reason to throw us out. We realized that the package Boss sent was too small for the task you are required to perform. It was as if we were mocking at your situation. You know what I mean. We talked to the boss and he accepted to double it to five hundred. He understands that your union is a powerful force in this constituency and you are the muscle by which this force comes to action.'

Sadi raised his bottle and gulped down half of the content with a vengeance.

'I think he wants another bottle,' Mulem said in a growl and started to signal to Buggie who wasn't watching.

'No, thank you Denis, this is enough,' Sadi said and saw Mulem frown, seemingly angry at a younger man calling him Denis.

Probably sensing the cold battle about to commence between his partner and Sadi, Kake put out a hand and Mulem reluctantly dropped a brown envelope similar to the one they had brought the other morning. Kake stared at the envelope in his right hand for a moment, smiled and began tapping it on his other hand,

'Esunge is presently assembling the executives of the Syndicate,' Kake reiterated, although making it to sound casual. 'By now they must have gathered in B & S Hall.' He pushed the envelope towards Sadi and shifted forward in his chair. 'What the boss is asking is this: you go and talk to your boys on his behalf and give them some of this little salt. What we want from them is their support to get our man at the head. Nothing complicated. Simple!'

'That is all, as simple as that,' Mulem hooted conclusively as though not willing to be left out of the talk.

'How far are you people ready to push a man?' Sadi asked Kake now after wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt.

'As far as the man is ready and willing to go,' Kake said with a wary grin.

'Good,' Sadi said, 'I reached the end of my road with you long ago and I pointed that out to you two days ago. I am not interested in the elections, or anything like it.'

'Look, look, Sadi, this is not about caring about things,' Kake said and looked hastily around the almost empty hall. 'It is about being powerful, influential, about controlling, making money and sowing for juicy positions when all the dust has settled. We are sure we shall succeed in this little game. And we don't want you to be left out of the jubilation. You know that we don't abandon our own!'

'Why try to drag me into your river of success?' Sadi asked with a mocking grin. 'Is it because, as you said, you've just discovered that the president of the Driver's Syndicate has a dead bus that needs to be replaced?'

'Yes, and no,' Kake answered and sighed. 'You have always been among the few respected young men in Njopongo and we think that it is time you are compensated for your great service to this town. '

'Even though you selfishly refuse working under our banner – because you want all the credit to your name alone,' Mulem tactlessly chipped in hastily.

Sadi pushed back his chair and stood up. 'I am really flattered to learn that I have served this town well even as the driver of a rickety bus. If you will excuse me, I need to get some food and rest. I wish you the best.'

Mulem now lost his fragile patience. 'Sit down, young man,' he growled.

Sadi placed his palms on the table and peered at him intently.

'Mulem, never order me around again,' he said menacingly. 'Never! Do you understand? If I should ask again, when will you people learn to respect the views of others?'

Big Buggie whistled.

'What views?' Mulem demanded, ready to charge Sadi over the chair. 'Views that have left people older than yourself in perpetual bondage of poverty and misery?'

'You think you are indispensable, huh?' Kake asked calmly, rising too from his chair. 'You are convinced, as those church people say, that you are the only way, the only truth and the only life to getting what we want, don't you?'

Sadi didn't feel as to have a fight of words again. He was tired and hungry and their argument only helped to churn his stomach. What he craved most now was a cold bathe and a thorough massage of his neck and shoulders.

'I am sorry if I disappointed you,' Sadi said slowly, 'but with or without me, I know you are capable of getting whatever you want around here.'

'My friend, you are a fool,' Mulem shouted and picked up a broom stick from the floor. 'Yes, without your help we shall certainly still get what we want.'

'It is a pity. I have always looked up to you as an intelligent young man who knows what is good for him in this short life,' Kake said, almost in a whisper, with a chilling smile on his thick lips. 'We came to you out of respect for normal procedures and you threw our generosity to our face. Of course, we shall leave you in the warm embrace of your holy views but not without warning you to be prepared for the worse days of your life once all this is over.'

'You refuse to listen to people who have the power to change your destiny,' Mulem said, picking his teeth with a broken piece of the broom stick. 'Just look at yourself. A young intelligent boy driving a rusty bus when your mates are sitting in air-conditioned offices behind computer screens. Tell me, now that your bus has been smashed like an old aluminium pot, what else will you do? You refuse to conduct an exercise that has the power to pull you out of your abyss of torn trousers and rumbling stomach to the skies of coats and champagne. Sadi, you are a stupid child, a disgrace to your father!'

Sadi picked up his unfinished bottle of beer and raised it to his mouth.

'And he sits among his fathers drinking beer!' Mulem complained harshly and slapped the bottle from Sadi's hand. The bottle shattered on the concrete floor.

Big Buggie looked up expectantly.

'Six hundred francs for that one,' the barman announced. 'I am coming with the bill. Anything else?'

They all ignored him.

Sadi breathed out slowly, turned and looked around the room before picking his way towards the door where the album seller was still fast asleep. Mulem took a step after him but Kake grabbed his wrist.

'Let him go,' Kake said. 'There are many ways to trap a squirrel. He might as well feel safe to know that Almighty Lobe will soon be sleeping in urine at the Judicial Police.'

Sadi stopped dead in his track and heard a soft laugh from Kake. 'No one is indispensable, Sadi. Nobody – not even you. We shall get to you faster than you can ever imagine. Good night.'

Sadi walked out into the night, feeling the cold air on his neck and arms. He searched his pocket for the bundle of keys Shaddy had given him and got into his friends old Mazda. He smiled as the engine immediately coughed to life.

'What a horrible blow!' he muttered.

It was seven thirty when he drove past Lotto Junction towards the roundabout where soldiers practiced march-past prior to National day celebrations. He had forgotten to buy something to eat. That could wait. If there was another good quality in Sirri that he cherished most, besides her tolerance and high affinity to forgive, it was her craftsmanship in the kitchen. With her at home, he didn't have to eat along the road. Despite the fight they had had, he was sure she would cook a good meal for him. She must have forgiven him by now. Sadi was sure of that. All she would expect from him would be a contrite smile accompanied by a firm huge and an

invitation to go for a short walk. He wouldn't need to tell her about his encounter with Mulem and Kake two nights before. He wouldn't need to tell her that her uncle had been behind the beating that almost maimed or killed him. What about the true source and the actual intention of the money Sirri had pretended to have given him to keep? Would he demand for an explanation? It was as if the entire family was making a big joke of him. But thinking over it this whole day had given him another view of Sirri's role in his life. She loved him and wanted the best for them despite nature's occasional speed-bumps. Let him sit back and give her a chance. How much would it cost him to do so? Shaddy had called it unproductive pride. If he let go of some of that which others see as pride, who knows, maybe he would then discover that small door, framed with peace that is always open after a window is slammed shut in the life of determined men.

Sadi thought he had driven into a gang of highwaymen when the sharp and violent whistle blasts tore the cold night air. He stepped on the brakes when he saw the bright flashlights darting from either side of the road. He swore, swerved to the sidewalk and stopped a few inches from the tires, broken chairs and rusted drums the policemen had mounted to block one lane of the road in front of the D.O's office. Being the only motorable road from the market, there was no escape route for all cars heading to or from the main town. When these men were out hunting for money, they used their whistles with evil verve as the animal hunters used their spears, arrows and traps.

In the course of the day, Sadi had heard that the mayor had spread the rumour of a possible manifestation before or after NMORA elections. He had advised the commissioner of police to station his men on guard, in preparation for any possible riot.

'Scratching a healing sore,' Shady had described the mayor's action. But unfortunately, the town's security wasn't in Shaddy's hands so he could say and think whatever he

wanted. Those who were concerned with the peace of the town went ahead to be alert.

Inspector Apana, a thin-waist policeman whose navy blue trousers started somewhere around his thighs and ended in twisted folds above his ill-fitting shoes walked up to the driver's door.

'Vos papier,' he demanded.

This was exactly the type of opportunity that men like Apana, who couldn't go through a day without drinking several bottles of beer, waited for: an official reason to trap people in irregular conditions and extort money from them.

'Good evening, Inspector Apana,' Sadi said amicably. He and Apana had shared drinks several times at Jet2. 'I don't know if Shaddy left the papers. This is his car – I mean Kondeka Shaddy.' He opened the pigeon hole and after searching for a while, he found only spanners, some cables and a box of match. 'I'm sorry. He didn't leave the documents.'

'N'est ce pas?' Inspector Apana asked sarcastically. 'Carte d'Identite!'

Sadi thought Apana had suddenly forgotten all the Pidgin English they used to speak when they met at Big Buggie's. He wasn't even pretending to have met Sadi before.

Sadi sighed.

'I lost everything yesterday,' he said. 'With all the mix up, I don't know where I dropped it with the rest of my car documents. But I have a photocopy with which I intend to make a new ID.' He produced the photocopy of his national identity card from his wallet and handed it to Apana.

'What is this?' Apana demanded, still in the French language.

'I am telling you that I lost the original in yesterday's accident.'

Inspector Apana squinted at the piece of paper illuminated by the beam of his torchlight like a mother with bad eyes reading her son's school report card. Still frowning,

he thrust the paper into his pocket and walked over to another policeman who was sitting nearby on a huge caterpillar tire and smoking cigarette.

Sadi watched them whispering to one another and his mind, for no particular reason, wandered to Jet2. He recalled that Kake was Apana's landlord. It suddenly dawned on him that Kake hadn't just made a casual verbal threat.

And he was right.

Apana walked back to him and opened the palm of his right hand.

'And this car, whose did you say it is?' Apana asked. 'No papers, eh?'

Who ever denied that there were many ways to trap a squirrel?

Sadi began to explain that it was Shadrack's car which he had been given to use while thinking of what to do with his own. He knew his words wouldn't save him now. A deal had been stroke and he was the sorry victim.

'Give me the keys,' Apana said and put out an open palm.

'What for?' Sadi asked. He saw the other policeman get up from the tire, drop his cigarette, stub it with the heels of his boot and pull out a mobile phone from his pocket.

'You will know when we get to the station,' Apana said.

'What are you charging me for?' Sadi asked Apana.

'Just hand the keys and shift to the next seat.' Apana said, not looking Sadi in the eye. 'Please, don't make it more difficult than it is already. We are only following instructions.'

Sadi ceded his place to Apana, shifted to the passenger seat and tried to keep his mouth shut. Apana took the driver's seat, reversed the car and headed back downtown towards the police station at Low Beach Njopongo where Sadi knew he would spend not only this night but the rest of the weekend and even a month unless a stronger power intervened.

*

Jet2 is amongst the many drinking spots that sprouted in town a year before I got admitted into ENAM. I had known the place when it was still a furniture shop. Someone, I think it should be Adamou, told me Jet2 or the Devil's Inn, is the most lethal place for a man with a heart disease to meet his woman-to-be. He said women who frequented the joint had a *forward-speed* and a microphone buried in their voice boxes so that when they picked up a quarrel with you, it was a loud twenty-words-per-second lashing. When I told him I will like to visit the place one day, he had gapped at me with eyes full of horror. Then he had said, 'Madam, I suppose you won't want to go there with bodyguards. I strongly recommend that you wait when your husband is around. You can then go together. No place for single married women.' I had accepted to do as he recommended. But since we always have a lot of catch-ups to do whenever Jerome came over to spend the weekend, I have not had the opportunity to set my eyes on the interior of Big Buggie's adventurous burning inferno.

Every day I tick off the dates on the calendar tagged to the door of my refrigerator and sum up how many days were left for my children to come and live with me definitely, until the next transfer. What a life!

I feel extremely lonely when I have to open the door to the house myself, walk along the cold and still corridor without the habitual noise of happy voices glad to see me home again. It is like some kind of imprisonment for me. And talking about imprisonment, I have never stopped wondering how it feels like, after spending a great chunk of one's life in affluence – the glamorous holidays in Europe and the Caribbean, the weekly thorough medical checkups for any traits of malice, the sumptuous meals with good wine – only to wind up, because of embezzlement, in one of the prisons whose conditions we had had the opportunity to ameliorate during our days in the reign of power but chose to

ignore because we had considered prison to be the home for a particular class of human beings.

Kake is one of the cunning brilliant men I have noticed around here. I have heard several stories about him. But this time I marvelled at his agility in shifting grounds when he sniffs danger. He had sold the idea to Lobe that getting Mulem into NMORA will enhance the mayor's control over the council area and ensure his re-election whenever that will be due. Lobe had given Kake a fat envelope to manage the event as he could and to bring back the results. With his extensive political networking, Kake soon sniffs a rumour that the mayor is about to be arrested. He runs to Arrung and sells him the idea of having a foothold in NMORA. He hints about the possible fall of the incumbent mayor but doesn't reveal the details. Arrung tells him he will have to think things over before taking a stand. Kake is a bit disappointed for not being able to reap from the two farms at once. But being the cunning man he is, he decides to hang around Lobe and harvest as much as he can before the mayor goes under, while waiting Arrung out.

This, I know, is one of the big puzzles that Sadi has been unable to unravel. He hasn't been able to know in which camp Kake belongs. And it is not my place to provide him with the details. He doesn't need them. He had said that he was no longer interested in the politics of the area. Maybe the day he will change his mind, he will know the truth and more.

Now I look at the people sitting around me. Adamou has his pen in his mouth and his eyes gazing out of the window. Zacheus is staring seriously at me with eyes full of questions. Sadi has found a spot on the table that he is circling with his fingers and his motions hold Sirri's attention.

I decide to let us in on Zacheus' story.

'When did you decide to rob?' I ask Zacheus, knowing fully well that he will not appreciate my choice of words.

'We did not rob anyone,' he fires back as I have expected. 'We take what they take from others. That is all.'

'And you ended up in sail for that,' I remind him.

'Because they make it so,' he says. 'We are nobody, Madam. We have no voice. They treat we like animals.'

'I hope you don't include me in that lot of *they*?'

He hesitates for a moment.

'I don't know, Madam,' he says in a subdued voice. 'Some people are different. But what about the others? One cocoyam spoil fufu!'

I can't agree more. A leader can either be a blessing or a curse to his village of region or nation. But this is not what I want to hear.

'You are right,' I tell him. 'Now tell us what happened on the day you went to take what they take from others.'

He eyes me suspiciously. I know what is in his mind.

'Yes, I have heard one version of the story,' I tell him. 'For example, in the story I have been told it is not mentioned that Squit, or whoever you call him, was your friend and that you considered his life to be in great danger and that he might die if you didn't help.'

'Madam, I beg you call the name with respect,' Zacheus interrupts, raising his hand. 'Dead person deserve respect.'

'Oh, sorry, I never knew that he died. When did that happen, before or after you tried to save him?'

'He die that same night after me and Mbodi leave,' Zacheus says solemnly. 'He die for our back after we leave.'

'Very sorry to hear that,' I tell him frankly. Taking the risk he took for a dead man. 'Did you know he was dead before embarking on your mission?'

'Madam, he is never bury yet,' Zacheus retorts as if I am a fool. 'I know he was dead. Mbodi told me. But we have to bury him and the others still are in hospital. So I still need the money that time.'

'Well, as I said before, I didn't know all this part of the story. All I have been made to understand is that you are a thief who has gone unnoticed all this while. I hope you understand. I need your version of the story. Now I know

part of what motivated you. It is your approach that I consider . . .' I can't find the right adjective.

'I find this meeting strange,' Sadi speaks out from a sudden rough landing. 'Why don't you just let me go home or send us back to sail or to court? There we shall have to give the answers you need to send us to Buea. What am I doing here?'

'Is that what you want? That I send Zacheus back to sail and then to court?'

Sadi looks like he is ready to tell me he doesn't care whatever way it goes.

'No, Madam,' Zacheus interrupts quickly. 'I know you want help me. I will tell you everything. As I am telling you, we want money for deposit for the others. And money to burry Squick. So nothing for fit stop me to get that money.'

'Yes, go on,' I say to him.

Sadi sighs in resignation and drifts off again to his land of weird reflections.

8

It was precisely three o'clock on Thursday that Bosco, the massive driver of the ox-blood coloured Toyota Corolla, at last decided his cab was full with four persons in the front seats and Zacheus and three others behind. Bosco himself sat comfortably with his drum-like belly rubbing against the steering wheel. He was sweating oil like pork on a grill.

In order to maximize their chances of not missing the right opportunity, Zacheus and Tonye had agreed that Zacheus should only board a cab that was making its first trip and whose driver had the habit of overloading. This way, they were sure that the vehicle would be stopped at the police control posts. It was a sign of promising success when Zacheus got to the park at the roundabout and saw Bosco's bartered vehicle. He didn't bother to look for another vehicle after Bosco had informed him that he was just from the garage and wanted to look for petrol money.

Zacheus had known Bosco for several years. He had washed Bosco's car more than fifty times. Bosco was the same, everlastingly talking and eating and coughing and spitting phlegm simultaneously. He didn't seem to have either lost or gained weight during the last decade. He was his constant one hundred and sixteen kilograms as he proudly announced whenever he was in his happy spirits. Now he was munching a mouthful of boiled corn and analyzing last evening's replay of a Spanish League football match.

Zacheus thought Tonye must be very annoyed by now. They had agreed that Tonye would borrow a motorcycle and wait at the nearest control post from Njopongo. He was supposed to be there at one o'clock latest. But given the state of things, Zacheus couldn't do otherwise. It took long for Bosco's cab to be full. The fault wasn't Zacheus'.

They had agreed that Zacheus must board a cab doing clandestine transport. This way their prey wouldn't miss the bait. Zacheus smiled at the thought of a fish snapping a hook covered with worms. He stared out of the window as the car cruised in a deadly speed past the entrance to Mkono Camp, horn blaring to warn off the tractor driver on the side road to the right from nosing into the highway. He had often loved the sight of the banana trees drifting lazily past as the car sped forward. In Zacheus' imagination, the car's movement represented how determined minds strove by cutting right through a crowd of idle watchers. The idle watchers of life gape in foolish awe at the movers cruising on, raising clouds of brown dust or splashing muddy water about as they speed past.

Zacheus thought of all the people he owed his thriving or existence to. His mind sailed back to last night. He thought of Grand Squick, his man. The night before, he had sat on the veranda of his rented room for about an hour, watching the mourners gather at Squick's father's house. Each time a new mourner joined the flock, a fresh and loud wave of moaning and wailing and rolling on the floor resumed and went on for several minutes. Then there was silent whispering once the newcomer had secured a bottle of beer. All went quiet again until a newcomer fanned the flame.

Tired of watching from a distance, Zacheus had braved himself and walked over to Squick's family home at ten o'clock. That was an hour after Mbodi had informed him of Squick's passing away. He had stood a long way from the veranda imagining how many homes were living this same ritual after losing a loved one in Tuesday's accident.

The night had been cold. There were no stars or moon in the sky. From the force of the breeze that ruffled the branches of surrounding trees, it was evident that there would be a heavy downpour before dawn. Standing in such weather and watching women wailing and rolling on the ground made Zacheus Esingi ill at ease.

The most pathetic figure was Squick's mother who sat there on the ground beside the door, legs outstretched. Her bare feet were caked with mud and long lines of tears ran from the edges of her eyes down to her neck. She looked like she had lost her voice. Zacheus could see her lips moving slowly but no sound coming out except the tears tickling down. He felt contaminated by her grief. His eyes too began to water. He recalled the last time he had shed tears. That was one afternoon when he and Ekongolo, the boy whose mother sold fish pie, watched through a hole on the plank wall of Simo's video club, that Indian movie in which a dog's master was killed and the animal had to avenge by tracking down and killing the murderers and placing a flower on its master's grave each time one of the murderers died. Zacheus had clenched his fists and coiled his toes until the tears dropped. He was eight then. He couldn't remember shedding more tears after watching that movie.

Until this night! For about an hour, he let himself cry freely, not attempting to hold back the flow. He didn't care if anyone called him a woman for shedding tears over the death of Grand Squick. He would weep for his friend – a man who was closer than a brother – killed because of the greed of policemen.

Late Squick! How it sounded painfully weird!

There was no misgiving in Zacheus' mind. Squick, if nobody else, must be avenged.

The police must pay!

He had mourned enough. For the umpteenth time that night he vowed to carry his plan to an end at all cost. Just as that dog in that Indian movie didn't go sulking in resignation, he would forge ahead. Now was the time for action. When he had spotted Kondeka Shaddrack and Misodi Tonye sitting on a bench placed under a tree for the Quarter Youths, he quickly got them to follow him to his room across the road.

Tonye was from the same stock like Zacheus, though from a younger batch of streetboys. He was an expert in

picking pockets. Zacheus knew him for undertaking more hideous projects than just breaking into shops and people's homes. Tonye was known to take contracts to torture and threaten. He was as courageous and dangerous as a drugged hunter dog. He was amongst those who felt that they had nothing to lose by being bad. If he died in search of his livelihood, then he died for a noble course. Accident de travail, he called it. As for Shaddy, he was a quiet mechanic who preferred to watch life from a good distance.

While Tonye and Shaddy had waited for him to tell them the purpose of his call that night, Zacheus Esingi had sucked his cigarette and blown the fumes towards the roof of the semi-dark room lit by a lone candle sitting on the central table. Zacheus had started smoking back in class three. In those days, before leaving for the CDC palm plantation on weekends to make exam brooms from palm fronts, he and his friends: Lucas (of blessed memory), Bruno Etame (now a medical doctor in Brussels) and Ebenezar Akpan (a film actor in Abuja), bought a packet of Delta Menthol. Each of them was entitled to three sticks. Most often he ended up smoking five because Akpan always gave up after smoking his first cigarette a quarter-way and coughing convulsively in the process. After the others boys obtained their first school leaving certificate and dispersed to pursue life away from Njiba, Zacheus had not been able to shrug cigarette away. Instead he had graduated into marijuana shortly after he became a park boy at the age of thirteen and had been mixing cigarette and marijuana in varied proportions depending on the project at hand.

'I am not afraid of them,' Zacheus had said as he leaned on the window frame looking out into the cold night. 'They are fat wrong! I never scare.'

Shaddy began to cough.

'Sorry, I forget you no smoke,' Zacheus had said and dropped his cigarette outside the window. He crossed the

room in long strides to open the door to let in some breeze and blow out some of the cigarette smoke.

He needed to think straight. For that purpose he resisted the urge to smoke. The mourning just across the road had been scrapping on the lining of his heart, augmenting his jerkiness. For ten minutes, he paced from the locked door to the two cane chairs in which Shaddy and Tonye sat in silence, patiently waiting.

'You see,' he had continued, 'Boys we must do something.'

The light from the candle got their shadows dancing on the floor and walls in ghostly patterns.

'We cannot fit let them go free,' Zacheus told them, 'Yes we cannot! Squick was my friend, my tight man, your friend too well. Linus too was deep with you Shaddy. Now they are lying in parts in de mortuary like butcher pork in a freezer.' His voice rose in these last words until he couldn't breathe. This time he didn't restrain his fingers from pulling out the packet of cigarette. He got one cigarette out and lit it in the candle flame.

'What do you have in mind?' Shaddy had asked, sounding tired. He had been with Sadi all day. What he needed most at the moment was sleep.

'We are going to make them pay!' Zacheus had replied, closing his eyes from the smoke wafting upward from the cigarette in his mouth. Shaddy and Misodi stared at him. 'Yes, we have to make the routiers and police pay for this.'

'And how do you plan to do that?' Shaddy asked, still in that weary voice that bore a trace of boredom.

'I was there myself,' Zacheus said, 'At the hospital. Whether by witchcraft or what, all doctor and nurse decide that until we pay hundred thousand deposit, man can die. And Squick die. We need money for bury Grand Squick and money to save Ambrose and the other.' Zacheus said seriously. 'We need money to bury your friend Solo. That is the deal. We go out and get the money.'

'How do you mean?' Tonye asked suspiciously. 'Who do you plan to rob?'

'No Misodi, no. Not robbery. I have never been a robber in my life and I will never be a rubber today. Drastic problem, drastic solution.' Drastic problem, drastic solution was a phrase he had memorized in his early days as a loader. He used it sparingly whenever he felt trapped and had to manifest confidence. Thanks to men like Squick, he hadn't used this phrase for three years until this night. He hadn't felt trapped in a desperate situation.

'The police have wound us for too long. The time has come we scratch them too. Leave a scar on their face so that when they look at their face, they see and remember what we do them.'

'See, Esingi,' Shaddy had said, leaving his chair and walking towards the centre table. 'Sadi told me this afternoon that he was convoking a general assembly meeting of all drivers tomorrow morning. We are going to collect the views of everyone and present to the administration.'

Zacheus had shook his head furiously.

'Shaddy, that is a lie, a very big lie. It will never work,' he said, dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his feet. 'Negotiations never bring any good to grasshoppers like me and you. Not with the authorities. We live in two very different world with a wide . . .' he paused for the right word to use. '– deep hole separating us. What we have to do is use force. Yes, force! That is the language they understand because it is the language they use all the time. Force, Shaddy. Radical measure.'

'Zacheus, we are all sad and angry,' Shaddy had said, 'but that shouldn't cloud our sense of reason. We cannot behave like fools.'

'So I be a fool?' Zacheus had asked.

'I didn't say so.'

'Then what are you saying?'

'Look Zach. You know the saying that if you are in the river and a madman steals your clothes and runs away you don't come out of the river naked to chase the madman into town. We all agree that some members of our police force are a disgrace, a collection of pot-belly rascals with no consciences. We all know the grain of our society that often gets attracted to that profession these days – small thieves in the quarter that everyone is happy to get rid of. Let us not make a full of ourselves. And you know you are the mayor's driver – a big man's driver.'

'This has nothing to do with mayor driver. This is a different Zacheus Esingi you are talking to right now. I care less about mayor. You see A.C in this room? Or TV or upholstery?'

Shaddy had shook his head.

'I get obligation for my friends which mayor don't know or care,' Zacheus went on.

'I still think you should hold on until tomorrow evening before trying to do anything that you may regret,' Shaddy had said.

Zacheus had stroke a match and lit a cigarette. 'Is that what you think too?' he addressed Tonye.

'Eh, well . . .' Tonye stammered. 'I just think that something must be done fast. As you said, the hospitals are not treating the patients because of deposits. If there is a way to raise the money then we better try that too while Sadi tries in his own side.'

'Good talk,' Zacheus said approvingly. 'That is how man talk. Shaddy, we need the money! Let Sadi go ahead with his politic dreams. I am not a politician. We need to face facts and hit the iron at the right time.'

'What exactly do you plan to do?' Shaddy had asked, walking back to his chair. 'How do you plan to raise all that money? Hundreds of thousands!'

'I will give you just the headlines now if you are with me,' Zacheus said and sat down. 'The rest we go talk very early tomorrow morning.'

'We are listening,' Shaddy said and stretched his legs.

And Zacheus had revealed his outrageous plan to these two men. Shaddy had vowed never to be part of such a dangerous scheme and had left Zacheus and Tonye in the dark room.

As Bosco's cab cruised on past the billboard reading SAFETY FIRST, Zacheus consulted his wrist watch. It was nine minutes past three. They would be at the entrance to Koka in about seven minutes. He folded his arms across his bosom and squinted to reduce the thrashing his eyes received from the thin fingers of rain blown in by the wind as the cab sped past Lobolobo Market. The rain was resuming again and this pleased him. The rain was beginning at the appropriate time. They would operate and leave without much commotion.

In the front seat, Bosco's slurry voice brought a lump in Zacheus's neck. The driver was complaining about the increase in fuel prices and the ungratefulness of passengers who, accordingly to him, were unwilling to recognize the sacrifice made by drivers to keep the transport network alive.

The two women sitting by Zacheus' left supported Bosco's worry and went ahead to crucify those responsible for selling fuel more expensive in the region where it was produced than in other parts of the country.

'And police them no go leave man rest,' Bosco said, hitting the steering furiously. He complained about the numerous barricades mounted on every road, tarred or not. 'They get every reason now for be for road – national security.'

'One way contribution,' said one of the women, the one sitting closest to Zacheus and wearing a black lace *kaba* that looked like sackcloth and tying a headscarf.

'You can carry the heads of human beings in Sacks & Motors from Ndimiyok to Malende everyday from January to December without ever being caught,' the man sitting directly in front of Zacheus said. 'The driver just doesn't have to hesitate to pay his contribution.'

Zacheus could only see the top of his head that peeped above the seat. But his voice sounded rough and hoarse.

With eight persons squeezed in the Toyota Corolla like sardines in a tin, Zacheus wondered what argument Bosco could possibly present as justification for overloading if he were ever written by the police and summoned for a legal procedure.

'Whether you get correct papers or not, you must give them money,' Bosco grumbled and hissed a curse. Zacheus didn't get the wordings.

'My child, their mothers have nothing to do with this,' the women in the sackcloth said. 'Most of them joined that work to escape from the misery of unemployment. If a child is born a thief, the itch grows with the child. Whether he becomes a pastor like Pa Primus, he will look for a tree to scratch his itches – '

'Sunday offerings will become the tree with the rough bark to scratch such itches,' the man in front of Zacheus said and laughed boisterously. Only Bosco laughed with him.

'And there they are again!' Bosco suddenly said with a tense air and blew his nose loudly into the shoulder of his left shirtsleeve.

Zacheus peered ahead. They were about fifty meters from Koka junction where the highway gendarmes usually stood under the shade of the mango trees controlling vehicles that plied the Njopongo-Douala Highway. He saw the long rows of vehicles parked on both sides of the road. There were at least eight vehicles on each lane, from passenger buses to timber trucks and lorries carrying eru or crates of beer.

As their cab approached the last old truck on the right lane with the fading inscription 'Man Pass Man' scrolled on

the two broad rubber mudguards covering the rear tires, Zacheus saw a pot bellied gendarme step on to the middle of the road with his right hand raised and the left hand holding a whistle in his mouth. He also spotted Tonye leaning on the mango tree beside a red motorcycle.

The gendarme whistled three quick blasts and waved their cab to join the queue. Bosco obeyed and stopped the cab beside the curb.

'Two thousands!' Zacheus heard Bosco grumble in a muffled tone and saw him raise himself slightly from his seat and withdraw a small folder obviously containing some of his car documents. He took out a two thousand francs bank note from the chest pocket of his dirty brown shirt and inserted the money between the pages of the folder before dragging himself out sluggishly.

The rain was slowly increasing in intensity and all the passengers sat still and seemed to be grateful that they didn't have to get out of the car like fat Bosco, run with a drooped head to the front of the queue, wait for the road to clear before crossing to the other side where the gendarmes waited.

'When will all this end?' A man in the front seat asked.

'When the world will come to an end, so don't nurse any hope,' the woman with the sackcloth responded.

'I will remember that, Madam,' the man said.

Zacheus opened the door, got out and caught up with Bosco before he could cross the road. He placed a refraining hand on the driver's shoulder, stopping his sluggish run.

'Give me the document, Biggie Bos,' he said.

'What –' Bosco began to say then stopped, staring at Zacheus.

'Just give it to me. Move the money. You can save that. I know the man. He is my friend.'

Bosco's face brightened at the prospect of not paying two thousand francs. He happily gave Zacheus the folder containing his car documents and stood aside, head bowed, to keep the rain from beating his eyes.

Zacheus crossed the road in a short run. He knew the two gendarmes on duty. The one sitting on the bonnet of a rented car holding an umbrella over his head was called Mballe. He lived in Bomaka and had a girlfriend called Caroline in Muea who sold roasted fish at Shark's Corner. Zacheus had eaten at the girl's place on many occasions. Not long ago, Mballe's wife and his two teenage daughters had come to Sharks to warn Caroline off their husband and father. In the minutes that followed, Mballe's youngest daughter almost lost her sight after Caroline splashed a bowl of water containing ground pepper mixed with spices on her face. Zacheus was the one who had rushed the screaming girl to Doctor Beseke's Clinic in Lobe's grey Land Rover. Mballe had paid the hospital bills, drank some more that night and pushed his wife off their bedroom window. She was picked up with several bones broken. The unharmed daughter had escaped to her stepbrother's house in Mutengene where she stayed for a month.

That was Mballe! The other gendarme looking up the road toward Douala, whistle in mouth, watching an approaching bus carrying a mountain of cartons was called Akono. His mother lived in a charity house build by the Presbyterian Church. Akono had packed her out of the family home she and her husband had built, accusing her of using witchcraft to block his rise in his job.

Zacheus watched Akono stop another bus. He noticed absence of a gun on Akono's hip holster. The gendarme's pockets bulged from the collected coins and bank notes. That was a good sign, Zacheus thought and turned around. He nodded at Tonye before walking over to present Bosco's documents to Mballe.

Mballe, still sat on the bonnet, handcuffs hooked to his belt. He took the folder from Zacheus and flipped through slowly from the first page to the last. He frowned and recommenced from the last page to the first and then looked up with scorn at Zacheus.

'What is this?' he asked.

'What is what?' Zacheus retorted.

Tonye came closer, playing a game of kicking the front tire of the vehicle on which Mballe sat, waiting.

'Your documents are not correct, and you are overloaded,' Mballe said and began to slide down from the bonnet. Zacheus placed himself right in front of him.

'Can I have my documents?' Zacheus asked in a low hiss.

'Are you shouting at me?' Mballe asked.

'Mr. Man, give that man money,' Tonye shouted at Zacheus, coming even closer. 'You know that Commandant does not stand under this rain for nothing. You know what he wants. Give it to him.'

'What money?' Zacheus shouted back, pretending to be annoyed by his partner's words. At the same time he made an attempt to grab the folder from Mballe's hand. Mballe went for a slow punch that creased Zacheus chin. In a flash Tonye plucked off the handcuffs from Mballe's belt and before the officer could understand what was happening to him, Zacheus fell on him, pinning him against the car bonnet with his massive body while Tonye struggled with Mballe's meaty wrist to snap in the cuffs.

'Hold it right there!' Akono shouted threateningly as he saw Zacheus slam his colleague on to the ground. His right hand went swiftly to his hips. He froze in shock and looked down at his hip. The holster was empty. He must have removed his gun and dropped it in the car to lighten his movements. The gun must have been an inconvenient load on top of all the coins in his pocket.

With the agility of a predator cat, Tonye darted around to the door of the car and got hold of one of the two guns that had been lying on the driver's seat.

'Today is our day to receive,' Tonye said with a hostile grin on his face, pointing the gun at Akono. 'Come over, slowly. You try foolish, I put a small hole in your big head.

Just one false step and you will be embracing your grandfather.'

Akono surely recognized the look of determination in Tonye's eyes. He started to walk up to the car, holding his ears with both hands.

In less than two minutes the road was blocked with vehicles. Passengers and drivers looked out of the windows, talking quickly and seriously. Some got out of their vehicles to get a closer look.

'No, stop,' Zacheus shouted at Akono. 'Move your handcuff and handcuff yourself before you move another foot.'

'Leave him to me,' Tonye said to Zacheus. 'Get this and start unloading this one's pockets.' He produced a black plastic bag from his trouser pocket and handed it to Zacheus. 'Please, be quick.'

Zacheus could sense that the crowded cars made Tonye stiff with nervousness. Tonye wasn't the type of criminal who drew up operation plans making provision for capture. But Zacheus had promised him the night before that should the operation go wrong he would reveal himself, tell the whole story to his boss' wife who, he was certain, would get her husband to intercede for them.

As Zacheus shovelled money from Mballe's pockets, he heard Tonye shout at Akono, 'Lie down flat.' From the corner of his eye, he saw Akono drop to the ground and lie flat, his hands behind his heard. Tonye walked brusquely up to where he gendarme lay and hit him hard on the head with the butt of the gun. Zacheus winced. Akono lay still.

'Tear off their long pockets,' Bosco shouted, beaming with excitement. He had crossed the road at last to have a closer look but he was prudent enough to keep a safe distance. No one loved the sight of a loaded gun pointing in their general direction.

'Tear the pockets, My Man,' Bosco insisted. 'It will be easier that way.'

Zacheus looked up thankfully at Bosco for the good suggestion and saw a radiating smile on the other man's fat sweaty face. He gripped one of Mballe's full pockets and ripped it off.

Bosco licked his lips at the sight of the bank notes and coins that scattered on the grown.

Zacheus scooped the money quickly into the now half-full bag, gathering some sand and pebbles alongside.

'Nice job, Boys,' Bosco shouted his approval, rubbing his hands happily. 'They don't need those pockets. Someone should have known that long ago.'

'Let's go,' Tonye shouted at Zacheus. 'Move quick!' He too had emptied Akono's pockets and was already heading for the rented motorcycle. Zacheus quickly got to his feet. 'Hurry. Climb,' Tonye said.

At that precise moment, Zacheus heard a harsh voice howl from somewhere amongst the clustered vehicles.

'Stay just where you are,' the voice said seriously.

Zacheus froze and began to turn slowly when a deafening sound dropped him on one knee. There was a sharp hush as though all tongues had suddenly been slashed with a sharp knife. He heard the noise of a motorcycle and raised his heard slowly. There was a man clutching his arm, the fingers of the clutching hand stained with blood and a gun lying on the ground between the man's feet. The man had that severe look of a brave soldier caught unprepared.

'Come on!' Tonye barked at Zacheus and swung the motorcycle around. 'Hurry, climb or I will leave you!'

Zacheus hopped behind the motorcycle and almost fell off when Tonye accelerated, missing the bleeding man's leg by a fraction of an inch. Tonye tossed the gun he had been holding behind them, and rode off through whatever space he could fine between the jammed cars.

*

Even Sadi is staring at Zacheus with eyes of disbelieve. That was a real mad adventure, he is surely thinking.

I have a question of my own.

'How much did you collect?' I ask Zacheus.

'My bag have five hundred and thirty four thousand,' Zacheus says quietly. He looks like a man in whose mouth a life toad has been forced. 'We divide the money into two parts. Four hundred for the hospital and the rest for Squick.' He sounds like a deflated athlete who has put in so much in a race and got cheated around the finish line.

He goes on to explain that they had gone first to the hospital that evening to pay the deposit. Zacheus had asked Tonye to accompany him to the accident ward to see how many patients were still there in order to determine how much deposit they will be required to pay. Tonye had suggested that Zacheus should instead go alone while he, Tonye began filling the payment forms at the cashier's office. By the time Zacheus returned from the ward, some five minutes later, Tonye had vanished with the bag of money.

Tonye is amongst those I call instantaneous realists. They do not worry about a distant timeframe. 'This is my current situation,' they say 'How best do I make use of it?' That same moment they devise a plan of action and ensure that it is executed immediately to resolve an instant problem or take advantage of an instant opportunity. No keeping things for tomorrow when they are not even certain about the next minute. And unfortunately, people like Tonye are everywhere. Various arms of our communities are led by such instantaneous realists whose questions never go beyond how they can use the moment to better themselves at that moment. With this kind of reasoning we cannot construct good roads that might better our economy in years to come. We think of our bank accounts at the moment T and prefer to swindle what is meant for the betterment of tomorrow

because at that moment T, we can only measure success and prosperity with respect to that instantaneous increment in what we, as individuals, own.

Zacheus was blinded by his sense of collective wellbeing and consequently lost sight of the sharpness of the mind of his instant-realist companion who quickly detected an avenue to improve on his moment and made the best use of it.

'So where is Tonye now?'

'Underground,' Zacheus replies.

'Where is underground?' I ask.

'He has left town,' Sadi says, 'He is somewhere in Douala now, mixed in the crowd.'

'Do you realize the grave crime you committed?' I ask Zacheus. His gaze drops to his palms.

'Madam, between him and those men, who is more of a criminal?' Sadi ask. 'I will say again that I don't think his interrogation is necessary. I can see that you people have made up your minds on what you will do. Simply say the word and get him dumped where you are convinced he belongs. I cannot believe that everyone else sees no crime in the extortion that goes on along our roads by men who are supposed to be the forces of law and order – the very embodiment of justice and peace. When some hothead gets angry enough to get at them you all shout CRIME.'

'Are you saying that what Zacheus did was right?' I ask him calmly.

'That is not what I am saying, Madam,' Sadi replies. 'What I know is that he had a good reason and the courage to confront them the way he did. The only unfortunate thing is that that man who was shot. But even that one, I think he deserves what he received. If you ask me I will say people in your position are the cause of what is happening because they condone it. I cannot still understand why the administration which people like you represent, sits back, fold its arms and pretend not to see what those men are doing to us. You all use the highways like me and the rest. Why don't you do

something? I will assure you Madam, there will surely come a time when you won't know who to arrest and question – when it will reach everyone here.' He places the edge of his left hand on his neck in a cutting gesture. 'A people can only be pushed so far.'

He is right but I am not about to tell him that. I decide to turn to Zacheus.

'Where did you go to after that?' I ask Zacheus.

Zacheus looks at Sirri.

'He came to look for Sadi and met me,' Sirri explains.

'I tell her what happen. Sadi was in prison, she tell me. I cannot go to the police station with her. I tell her I cannot fit sleep in my place. And I never want to disturb patron's madam until I know the situation correct. She leave me in Sadi house that she is going to see her auntie. All night she never come. That is where I sleep, in Sadi house. Sharp-sharp morning, I went to see patron and his wife to tell them.'

9

After being chased in nightmares through all types of rough terrains smeared with blood from bleeding men, Zacheus woke up in a bath of sweat. It was still twilight when he smuggled himself out of Sadi's house to his own, took a long bath and then took a motorcycle to the mayor's house. He met the three members of the Lobe's family standing tensed in the living room like players before an indirect kick in a football match. Madam mumbled a weak 'Good morning' in response to Zacheus' greeting. Lobe simply walked to one of the leather sofas, picked up the car keys and tossed them at Zacheus.

'Get the car ready,' he said without looking Zacheus' way.

Like most servants of men like Lobe, Zacheus had learnt to read private domestic scenes and fade away to his business without asking questions. So he caught the keys and walked out quickly to the garage to check the car. If they were to get at him today, it would be best to find him with the mayor.

Mapito Lobe Cornelius was a solid name. It was a name many considered synonymous to absolute success, happiness, self-actualization and several other states most men would crave to attain in this life. In addition to being the mayor, he was the MD of Seams Incorporated, a road construction company with headquarters in the only two-stories building along the same street with the famous Sieve Night Club. Lobe was the actual owner of Nimbus Cluster Hotel Group, with nine branches in four regions of the country, although the popular knowledge was that the group was owned by the Japanese. He owned twenty-three trailers that transported containers along the Chad and CAR corridors, all registered under a transit company run by the Moustapha Brothers. For his personal comfort, he owned just three villas: one in Kribi,

another in Bafoussam and the one in which he lived permanently with his wife and daughter in Njopongo.

Eighteen days from this Friday morning would make exactly three years since Zacheus Esingi began chauffeuring him. It was a good job with fabulous partying opportunities. The only inconvenience was the long hours of waiting. Even this was oiled by the comfortable car seats, air conditioner and stereo radio set. Most often, when Zacheus decided to make peace with the realities of his existence, in the silence of his heart, he solemnly forgave his step father for throwing him out of his house. He was grateful to Squick for teaching him to drive a car and indebted to Mbodi for getting him a job in the slaughterhouse. Each of them in their little ways participated in paving his way to become Lord Mayor Lobe's driver. That was life's chain reaction that no human has the power to control.

Sitting in the car on the paved lane a short distance away from the door to the main hall, Zacheus caught a few words which gave him a rough idea of what might be the trouble this time. These three years of chauffeuring the Lobes had endowed Zacheus Esingi with a sharp sense of noting when the family wound was scratched and to keep away and say as little as he could when the blood dripped.

From the angry voices coming from the house now, he was convinced there was trouble again. Tuesday, it was Sirri who packed her bag and left the house after a loud and bitter quarrel. Lobe had flown into a rage, calling her an ungrateful woe that went around spreading her legs for a skunk – whatever was a skunk. Sirri in turn called him a wealth-blinded, arrogant, valiant, pig-headed tyrant who didn't know when his house was collapsing on him.

What a life to live!

This time around it was Muto Confidence, the last child of the family and the only child still in the country. Zacheus could tell that Muto too was in trouble again as all the Lobe's offspring seem to be most of the time. From what the

gardener told Zacheus in a whisper while Zacheus washed the car, Muto had hidden three consecutive convocations from the principal of her school. The convocations summoned her parents to urgently report to the principal's office. Since Monday, Muto wasn't going to school and her parents' seemed to have believed she was actually ill until the Principal called Lobe on Thursday afternoon asking him why he hadn't attended to his summons.

A few months earlier, Muto had been dismissed from her third college in a row for reasons of indiscipline and poor academic performance. Eight weeks later, her father got her admitted into Government Comprehensive College Njopongo.

Barely a week into the first term in her fourth college, Muto spat on her Maths teacher's face for reading her test marks allowed to the class. Lobe had been away in the Western Province on business, leaving Madam Belame with the task of negotiating for the two-week suspension to be lifted. She went and pleaded with the principal and three days of grass-cutting replaced the suspension. Two days after, Muto was again sent home. She had found out that with five thousand francs she could get a couple of boys to do her daily quota of grass-cutting when the DM wasn't watching. Someone reported and she got back her original two-week suspension. This time her mother refused taking another trip to Kima's office to plead.

The two-week suspension turned out to be a period of absolute carefree for Muto. After a week of endless quarrelling with her daughter who never came back home until after 11 P.M almost every night, Belame Celine had sought her husband's intervention by phone. Lobe made a call to the college Vice Principal and Muto grudgingly returned to school after ten days at home. Shortly after Lobe returned, he discovered that Muto had stolen one of his credit cards and gotten it blocked in a teller machine in the bank down by the market.

While the car stereo slowly played out *Elimb'a Dikalo* by Etienne Mbape, Zacheus tried to imagine what crime the girl must have committed again and a thousand possibilities flooded his mind. He thought that at fourteen, Muto was already too hard to chew. She was a perfect example of what they called a "spoiled child".

Zacheus Esingi compared working for men like Lobe, whose children's morality had been trimmed very thin by their parent's fat bank accounts, to hanging by one's fingers on a piece of rope over a pit of boiling lava. The rope of endurance might snap at anytime, throwing him into that hot crater.

The knock on the car window startled him.

'Are you sleeping?'

It was Madam Belame. She was holding an umbrella over her husband, not the type of umbrellas with spokes that got bent by a mild wind. It was a luxury piece of work with a silver plated handle bought at Casinoras for thirty thousand francs, three thousand francs short of Zacheus' monthly salary.

'No Madame, hiding from the rain,' Zacheus answered awkwardly and jumped out to open the left rear door for his boss. He noticed that Lobe was dressed in an elaborate sky-blue agbada, one of the three he had brought back from Kaduna some months back. Muto hopped in first, frowning elaborately. Zacheus stole a quick sideways glance at Madame Belame and saw what he had expected to see – those customary thin lines on her cheeks traced by tears on her thickly applied make-up. She must have gone through her screaming ritual that had become almost a daily routine.

It started to drizzle again and the breeze and dark sky announced the coming of a storm. Zacheus wondered when the rains would eventually cede their place to the long awaited sun. It had been too wet this year, reducing cocoa yield and seriously affecting the assistance he often received from one of his step brothers who owned a cocoa farm.

'What direction, Patron?' Zacheus asked as he strapped on his seatbelt and watched Madame walking back slowly towards the house with her head appearing too heavy to hold upright.

'To her school first,' Lobe mumbled tiredly although it was only eight o'clock.

Zacheus noticed that Muto wasn't putting on her school uniform. But who was he to ask why? He was a mere driver, a servant.

As he swerved the brand-new Infinity away from the driveway and out of the gate onto the main road, he stole another quick glance at his boss through the rear-view mirror. What he saw was the face of a man struggling to suppress the fears of another anticipated shock. It seemed family distress had come to stay from when Lobe's eldest son, Ekale was jailed in the United States for shooting and killing a man. Last year Ekale Lobe Jr. came back home to get married to Mabel, his college sweetie and daughter of Seams' Legal Adviser, Barrister Kelong Anthony. An elaborate wedding party was held in Summit Hotel Limbe. Barely three months after the couple returned to the U.S, Ekale shot and killed a man, a fellow countryman he suspected was having an affair with Mabel.

As misfortunes always come in a drove, Operation Sharp Talons had only come to paste pepper on the Lobe's family wounds. There was hardly enough sleep under those expensive roofs these days when news of effected arrests and rumours of those in the waiting list circulated everywhere. Passports were being confiscated and convocations served. Every wealthy civil-servant and directors of state-owned corporations were watching their backs after the governor decided it was time to bring embezzlers of public funds in his region to the light of justice. Everyone did all they could to evade being captured in this new net. Prados were being replaced with rented taxis to take children to school.

From the analysis made in front of Amougou's newspaper stand, one motorcyclist thought this exercise was a sham. He said that he didn't see the architects of Operation Sharp Talons as men with guts big and solid enough to carry such a project to an objective end. His conclusion was based on simply reasoning: everyone knew where the claws would finally grip if Sharp Talons was given free wings to grip whatever prey it found. This would mean the total collapse of the existing system of things in the region and only riff-raffs like motorcyclists and truck-pushers clawing down there in mud for their lively crumbs would applaud such a crushing strategy.

From what Zacheus had heard, there was no need for his boss to be worried by a project of the nature of Operation Sharp Talons. For a start, he had been in this game of swindling for long. He must have mastered all the ropes. And he had wide and deep connections. Well, unless one of his associates wasn't proactive enough and got himself frightened by the shadow of a threat as solid as smoke.

Sharp Talons was a charade designed to white-wash the dirty walls of regional integrity by making scapegoats of those who didn't see the need to ensure the protection of their wellbeing through regular donations to the central pool. It was a sham designed to ring the warning bell to those who stubbornly refused to toe the line of camaraderie, thinking that they could eat and digest all on their own without spitting some to those who handed them the plates full of gold. It was a stone expertly shot to kill two big birds: show to those who insist on seeing the willingness of the authority to do something about the rate of corruption in the house; and to remind all appointed servants of the realm of their unconditional obligation to oil the fingers that fed them.

Maybe those who reasoned this way were all wrong, Zacheus told himself. He fervently hoped that they were terribly wrong. After all, what do riders and car-washers know about saving the face of a region from the raging barks of

donors? The pillars of the house were rotten and something had to be done. Only time would tell how wrong he was to undermine a well intended rescue plan.

'Put on the radio, please, and tune to 102.6,' Lobe said. He sounded frail and even ill.

'Yes, Patron,' Zacheus said and did as he was told.

Lobe grunted as the hoarse voice of Clement Ngong read out the statistics of malaria-caused deaths in the country. According to Clement, malaria today accounted for forty percent of infant mortality while over the last decade, fabulous sums of money were being pumped into the region from international donors to combat malaria and HIV/AIDS.

Zacheus would have loved to know how the battle against HIV/AIDS was actually being waged inside offices by men sitting in leather armchairs behind huge polished desks covered with sheaves of paper adorned with red stamps.

'Thank God, I am only a chauffeur,' he said, not knowing he had spoken allowed.

'What did you say?' Lobe asked from behind.

'Nothing, Patron – just thinking,' Zacheus responded hastily and hooted for the gateman to open the college gate.

Students stood on their desks and strained their necks to watch, whistle and jeer as the car drove into the college campus, rattling the pebbles on the driveway. Zacheus couldn't hear what the students shouted but the excitement in the air told the tale of Muto's celebrity. He stopped the car in front of the principal's office, jumped down and ran around to open the door for his boss and his daughter.

'Thank you Mr. Lobe for coming,' the principle said from behind his desk as they entered his office. Kima Aaron was a stout man in his early sixties with shining grey hair and a wide nose on which perched a pair of huge reading glasses. He reminded Zacheus of an owl he had owned while living with Chisel-teeth as a boy.

Kima Aaron was notorious for his sternness, an administrator with little scruples when it came to landing the

axe. He bit, pulling out blood, and smiling evilly like Dracula. Most people believed he was lucky to have been promoted to the rank of principal and that that was certainly his ceiling. Inflexible men like him with stony eyes incapable of distinguishing between *an authority* and *a nobody* didn't have a chance of walking far down the corridors of the Lords-of-the-land.

'Please, do sit down Mr. Lobe,' Kima said out of sheer politeness, standing to shake Lobe's hand.

'I know you are a very busy person, Mr. Lobe,' he went on to say as he sat down again and pushed up the glasses to his eyes. He gazed at his huge mahogany desk with embarrassment and began sorting through the loose papers scattered on it.

'I won't take much of your time,' he said in a tone that sounded more like a warning than an apology.

'I am not in a hurry, Aaron,' Lobe said.

'Fine then,' Kima said and turned towards an adjoining door and shouted, 'Mr. Ekembe, can you come in please, and bring those children with you.' He smiled at Lobe and rubbed his hands together.

'So how is the family,' Kima said, attempting small talk.

'We are surviving,' Lobe replied and brought out his cell phone, as though indicating that he wasn't here for small talks.

Shortly, a tall man with a haggard thin face and hairy arms peeping out of his shirtsleeves shirt like a spider's walked in from the adjoining room. The man nodded hastily and than hurried out through the main door to Aaron's office. Zacheus recognized him as the college Discipline Master, Ekembe Moris.

But for the game being played between Kima and his stubborn papers that kept falling under the desk, the room was silent. After about six minutes of waiting, Ekembe returned trailing behind him three girls of about Muto's age.

Two of the girls dragged their feet along like sheep to the slaughter while the third looked as if it was her birthday.

'Sit down,' the principal said to Ekembe and then faced Lobe fully. 'For some time now we have been analysing your daughter's general conduct. I won't get into the details here. You will find every thing in this report.' He waved a sheaf of papers held together by a rusty paperclip.

'On Monday the sixth, she was caught exchanging test scripts with another student who, as we had been hinted earlier, she paid money to copy notes for her. She stabbed my teacher's hand with a pen and brought total chaos on campus by throwing stones at any one who attempted to come near her. In her hysteria she blurted out names of male teachers who she claimed gave her failed marks because she rejected them.' He stopped and eyed Lobe, his famous sly grin sitting on his lips.

'What do you mean by her rejecting them?' Lobe asked with a look of puzzlement on his face.

'Well, according to her, there are some teachers in my staff who wanted to have her. You understand what I mean.'

Lobe didn't say whether he understood or not.

From what Zacheus had heard, before Lobe sent all his boys abroad, if he wasn't paying medical bills for a girl who had been beaten by his son in a night club, he was getting his insurers to replace a car his son had bashed against an electric pole, or phoning around to have one of them bailed from the police for one crime or another. Neighbours called his children RAC which stood for Roving Ambassadors of Crime. Out of the five children, there wasn't one who pretended to be the family's redeemer.

'You can deduce she has been on it for a long time now!' Kima was saying. 'As for those teachers, their files were forwarded to the delegation yesterday.'

Zacheus watched his boss. Lobe appeared to be several miles away from the room. He seemed to be sitting on a high cliff and watching the relics of his monumental family glory

being shattered into tiny fragments of despair ready to be washed away by waves of frustration. Zacheus had heard him tell friends more than thrice that Muto was his last hope. Being as stunningly beautiful as her mother had made Lobe hope she would be different. It might not have occurred to him that gifts of nature were bestowed to serve their recipient in accomplishing their purposes in life. Muto's purpose in life needed to be identified first before any celebrations could be allowed. Otherwise hoping in her sanctity would only serve as a fast way out of this life through the huge door of a heart failure.

As though drifting back from a nightmare to reality, Lobe focused his gaze at a spot on the ceiling and shook his head slowly.

'No, this can't be happening!' Lobe said in a whisper, his lips quivering.

'Calm down, Mr. Lobe. It is all true,' Kima said, mopping his eyes with a handkerchief to hide a smile. He seemed to be enjoying the slow pain Lobe was going through. Who wouldn't, if given the opportunity to heap faeces on the head of the biggest contractor in the region who bagged home seventy percent of every budget allocated to his company for the construction of a public utility and did surface dressing with the rest – hardly paying those who did the work?

'We knew you won't believe a word of it,' the principal went on to say and then turned to smile at the thinnest of the three girls who had come in with the DM, the one that looked like she had a party. She had a peaceful bearing like an abandoned ancient artifact leaning on a tall wall closet.

'Come forward Lynda,' Kima said, beckoning to the girl to come closer to his desk.

The girl swallowed and trudged forward.

'How old are you Lynda?' Kima asked softly, placing his open palms on the desktop.

'Thirteen, Sir.'

'Thirteen,' Kima repeated for emphasis. 'Tell us what happened between you and Confidence.'

Lynda looked around her. She appeared calm and ready for the meeting.

'Last week, after Chemistry class,' the girl began to say.

'Wait,' Kima interrupted her and tugged his head into one of the side drawers of his desk. After knocking down items that sounded like cutlery, he re-emerged with an ancient sound recorder. He checked the battery and then pushed home the recording button. He placed the device gently on the desk.

'Yes, go on,' he said, rubbing his hands and smiling like a wise detective.

Lobe cut off an incoming call in his phone.

'Last week,' the girl said and was again interrupted by the principal.

'Can you repeat your name, please?' Kima asked.

'Lynda Paulette Sandrine Falle.' The child had that silky voice that made one to pick the words from her lips before they fell out of her mouth.

'Yes, Lynda Falle,' Kima said and opened both palms for her to continue.

'Last week, after Chemistry, Confidence asked me to come and help search for her earring which she had misplaced in the toilet …'

'What happened when you got to the toilet?' Kima leaned back in his chair and demanded.

'She closed the door,' Lynda said and glanced at the other two girls behind her. 'Then Beatrice and Anna came out of another room.'

'How were they dressed?' Kima asked as if very anxious to get to the end of the story.

'They were naked,' Lynda replied.

Zacheus gasped and covered his mouth with his hand.

Kima nodded and folded his hands behind his head.

'Then Confidence began touching me and lifting my skirt and telling me that I am beautiful and that I will never lack anything again if I join them in their game . . .' Lynda stopped talking.

Kima smiled at the ceiling fan before looking at Lobe again squarely in the face. 'When she fought back in an attempt to escape, these two morons gagged her with Confidence's panties. Meanwhile Confidence went back into one of the cubicles to get this.' The principal pulled the side drawer open again and brought out a plastic dildo which he placed gently on the table like a raw egg.

Zacheus' heart skipped to his mouth. 'I am finished,' he said in his heart. He thought he heard Lobe groan. Zacheus recognized the dildo. Muto had asked him to buy it for her, giving him twenty thousand francs as commission. Zacheus had bought it, believing it was for her Human Biology class. When he latter suspected the true use, after seeing it in her bag during one of her trips to Limbe, he hadn't the courage to report to her parents. How would he explain the fact that he bought the object for her? It would mean his immediate dismissal.

'This is one of the things they use between them,' Kima said, pointing at the dildo. 'Who has it, Beatrice?' he shouted at the plumb girl with a huge pimple beside her nose.

The girl pointed at Confidence.

'You are not a mute, I believe,' Kima shouted, staring at his recorder. 'Who has this thing?'

Beatrice began to point and then quickly dropped her hand. 'Confi,' she said.

'Who is Confi?' this time it was Ekembe who asked.

Beatrice's finger began to rise again and then received a sharp slap from the DM.

Kima smiled evilly.

Beatrice swallowed nervously.

'Confidence bring it,' Beatrice said beneath her breath.

'What language are you speaking?' Kima shouted. 'Confidence bring it!'

There was a moment of silence as Lobe turned to gawk at his daughter as though expecting her to scream her denouncement of the girls' story. Instead, Muto was staring down at her new pair of shoes.

'Confidence, tell me it isn't true!' Lobe said, pleadingly.

Muto's eyes didn't shift from her shoes.

'It was God who got Ekembe there on time otherwise these devils would have destroyed this child,' Kima said in a low, reflective tone.

'No, no, no!' Lobe was mumbling. He seemed to have reached what they called this days *completion point* – the point where all forms of physical and moral torture began.

'Mr. Lobe, your daughter is a shame to the values this institution stands to uphold,' Kima said. His tone was jovial and his eyes sparkled like those of a doctor announcing the birth of a child into the family of a couple after six years of a barren marriage. 'I don't know where she got this idea from – with homes like yours with satellite dishes that capture a hundred channels from across the world, it is not unusual to arrive at a situation like this.'

'I . . .' Lobe began to say something but swallowed the rest of his words. He clapped his hands over his ears. 'A hood of vipers!' he said almost to his hearing alone.

'When we interrogated them, Confidence confessed that she has been doing it for the past two years,' Ekembe went on to add as though to exonerate his institution from any possible accusation of being a breeding grown for such sexual inclinations. 'She started it in her former school before coming here.'

Muto's gaze dropped back to her shoes.

Lobe looked as though he was on the verge of picking a heart attack. He couldn't speak.

'Children of today!' Ekembe muttered and wiped some chalk from the back of his right hand.

'This doctrine of rights is doing its most to insult the handiwork of God in creating woman for man,' Kima growled, this time visibly angry. 'They vigorously and heartily defend the course of same sex with their doctrine of the right to love and marry,' Kima barked, his eyes glowing.

'They steep the morality of the human race in dirty swamp waters. But so long as I am the head of this institution, such appalling, degrading and disgraceful practice must be weeded out of my immediate vicinity.' Kima sounded grave and seemed to be telling Lobe that he commanded this territory and there was nothing Lobe could do about it.

'The other day I was watching a program in the TV where polygamous marriage was beaten and crucified on a tall cross, yet the same people turn a blind eye to all other forms of moral pervasion. Well, Lord Mayor, we have decided to give back your daughter,' he announced brusquely, adjusting his spectacles over the tip of his nose. He picked up two sheets of paper and hastily signed and stamped them.

'What is the date of today?' he asked nobody in particular.

'Friday, the seventeenth,' Ekembe said after consulting the calendar on the wall behind Kima's broad leather armchair.

'It will be a rotten sore to the reputation of this school to keep your daughter,' Kima said lugubriously and pushed the papers towards Lobe. 'It is unfortunate that we too have to do like the rest – give back your daughter in the middle of the term. She is a bad influence already and we can't continue to keep her after all her disgraceful demeanours.'

It appeared Kima and Ekembe had planned to make sure they enjoyed seeing Lobe in agony. Kima didn't hide his pleasure as he smiled freely when he felt as to. As for Ekembe, he sounded sorry but his eyes revealed a heart simmering with amusement.

'I think what she needs is a long holiday with her grandparents.' It was Ekembe who suggested spiritedly.

'Maybe she will be taught the true values of life and not what television trumpets for everyone to follow.'

Kima nodded, endorsing his DM's suggestion.

'Children nowadays are kept from their grandparents for reasons of security,' the principal said. 'Parents say they don't want their children spoiled by pampering grandmothers. They prefer keeping them during the holidays and appointing the television screen their exclusive rabbi while the true school of life was fading away in their older family members.'

Lobe raised his head and stood up abruptly.

'Thank you, Aaron,' he muttered as he collected the signed papers. 'I must be leaving now.'

Kima appeared shocked for a brief moment and then recollected himself and stood up.

'We are sorry,' he said as Lobe shook hands with both men.

'In fact, it is very unfortunate,' Ekembe added.

Lobe walked slowly out of the office without another look at his daughter.

Zacheus ran past him to open the car door. 'What about…' he began to ask about Muto but revised his thoughts quickly.

'My God, Muto too turned out to be a public urinal like the others,' Lobe cried out as they drove out of the school gate. 'At what age?'

Zacheus hoped he had an answer.

'My confidence! My last hope.' Lobe's voice came out hoarse and shaky. 'I feel so empty, so frightened to realize that all my effort in this life is wasted. Even this last one I thought I would groom into my friend, my collaborator . . . to become a confident and successful woman . . . she just eroded everything. My last pillar of hope!'

Then he began to sob.

The rain was now falling heavily and the wipers weren't able to compete with the downpour. Zacheus drove off the main road to an empty street plagued with potholes. He

stopped the car in front of a closed provision store. He could see blurred forms of people on motorcycle with drooping heads and eyes surely squinting from the assaulting downpour, struggling to find their way around the numerous potholes.

From the rear-view mirror, Zacheus Esingi watched the Managing Director of Seams Incorporated blowing his nose in his agbada. Zacheus didn't try to console him – he couldn't. There often comes a time in a man's life when consolation is more painful than the unrestrained release of grief.

After a long while of listening to the music played by the rain on the metal body of the car, and the husky groans of his boss, Zacheus finally thought the man had cried enough. He felt Lobe's soft hand tap him on the shoulder.

'You see, Zacheus,' Lobe said, forcing a smile. 'You are a young man but I must tell you something: in this life there is a price to pay for everything. Before getting into politics and becoming what I regrettably am today, I was a small hopeless contractor. In 1974 I got a small job in a boarding college in Buea. You might know the place – Our Lady of Grace. It was there that I met Bela. She was seventeen and in Lower Sixth. I was twenty-three. With the assistance of her dormitory captain and one of the college security men who was my friend, I was able to see her twice a week in secret. When our secret business finally became public – when Bela became pregnant of that gangster now in jail – her parents were mad with rage. Her mother said all the terrible things a man wouldn't want to hear from a mother-in-law-to-be. She called me all sorts of names – a *wolf* was her favourite. She vowed never to step her feet on my door. And she kept her words till this day. Can you imagine? My mother-in-law has never come to my house.'

Zacheus knew Belame's mother very well. She was a smallish, stern woman with a sheepish narrow face and greying hair and a very vigorous and vibrant nature. She lived

about four hundred meters up the street from where they now sat in the car.

'While Aaron and Ekembe broke the news a while ago, I was seeing Bela in my mind's eye climbing over the high school fence unafraid of the pieces of broken bottles sticking out at the top,' Lobe went on dreamily. 'I saw her hiding behind the chaplain's house to change from her school uniform into a red mini-gown I had bought for her. I saw her getting out of a taxi and smuggling herself into my room with a black shawl worn over her head to avoid her being recognized by anyone who might be watching. And it dawned on me that it is a similar game that our children are playing on us, each in their different ways…'

Zacheus suddenly lost interest in what Lobe was saying.

The rain had ebbed slightly and he saw a woman on a motorcycle taxi right ahead of them, pointing at the car and talking anxiously to the rider. The motorcycle drew closer and stopped and the woman alighted, paid the bike rider and waded across to the car, carrying her wet wrapper above her knees to keep it from soaking in the puddles.

'Your mother-in-law, Mama Joki!' Zacheus announced and leaned backward to open the rear door.

The woman hesitated for a while before hopping in.

Lobe wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his gown and tried to look normal.

'I knew from the start how your end will look like,' the woman said accusingly. Her thin voice sounded scornful but the eyes Zacheus saw from the mirror were soft and bore a glint of pity.

'I had sworn never to partake in your filthy wealth but here I am sitting in your one-hundred-million car,' the woman added, looking around the car as though searching for mosquitoes as she folded her wrapper between her thighs and shifted as far from her son-in-law as the space in the back seat would allow.

'It is because I am a mother and because I have no power to stop your fall that I am running under this rain like a duck looking for you,' she added frantically, rubbing her palms together to warm herself.

Zacheus switched off the AC and turned on the heater.

'If you have any sense of self-preservation left in you, leave this town and run away this very moment,' Mama Joki said. 'One more hour of delay and you won't be able to leave town. I heard one of your supervisors has just been arrested. Doctor Epepe's passport has been seized. I don't know how true all this is. You know people talk a lot these days. What I know with certainty, because I saw them with my own eyes while coming back from the market, is that the fishers-of-thieves have cast their net around your house waiting for you. Your wife begged me to find and warn you. That is why I am here. Run while there is still time.'

She tried to open the door but Zacheus had blocked them after she got in.

She sighed and seemed to remember something else.

'Do you remember what I told you over seven years ago when you people ate the money intended for the rehabilitation of this road?' she asked contemptuously, staring pitifully out at the potholes swallowing the raindrops.

Zacheus saw Lobe swallow nervously and stare out of the window with half-closed eyes.

'The moment you make money your master, your life is in shackles,' the woman pronounced. 'That is what I told you. Lobe, your life is wasted! It's unfortunate but I must say that I wish the authorities will have the courage and willpower to carry this process to an end – to fish out all thieves like you and put them over a hot grill where they will sweat out all that they stole from the common man. It is very sad to see how some of you will end your lives after living all your years of youth amassing all this wealth with the hope of leading a happy life in your old age. A single man with a single stomach, grabbing billions of francs and distributing them in

holes all over the world like moles when everyone else around them is unable to afford a cup of rice to feed their children! How many plates of food can you eat in a day, my son? How many bottles of whisky or beer or water can you drink at a time? What makes you people think that tomorrow will meet you alive after depriving others of the little crumbs on the floor of life? You all think you are doing great for yourselves but forget that there is a God who doesn't sleep. There is a God who oversees everything. He is just too old and has lost his quick fist of youth. But he does react at the right time – like this.'

She eyed Lobe piteously and shook her head. 'How many hours of good sleep do you think God will give you after hearing the ceaseless cries of the miserable multitude ringing out to him for help? You do all this, thinking it is happiness you crave, not knowing you are heaping hot coal on your head and on the heads of your children. Just have a look at yourself, Honourable Contractor, Lord Mayor. How happy are you today, my son?'

With this question, she nudged Zacheus.

'Open this door, my son,' she said to Zacheus.

Zacheus unblocked the door, leaned backward and got it open for her.

She got out of the car and stood under the rain with the door ajar.

'Sorry for soiling your chair,' she whispered before slamming the door shut. She folded her wrapper again between her thighs, hailed another motorcycle to take her to her rickety plank house which might have been flooded by now considering the heavy downpour.

They sat in silence, watching her go. 'Whenever I see this woman I feel . . .' Lobe began to say and then stopped, probably thinking of the right word. 'With those small, hot eyes of hers! That whipping mouth that says whatever it pleases to whoever it wants!'

'Patron, what have you ever done to try to gain her friendship?' Zacheus spoke the words without thinking and bit his lips as though to take them back.

Lobe didn't answer immediately. He seemed to think it over for a while. Then he said, 'Young man, there is nothing I can do to change that woman's mind. She detested me from day one. From when I manipulated Bela into giving me her school fees to buy some tools I badly needed to commence my work, this woman had hated me. She called me a poor adventurer. Because of her snobbish attitude and the love I had for my wife, I vowed to become a millionaire – at all cost – thinking that by becoming rich I will automatically win everyone's admiration and respect. But I was wrong. I only succeeded in expanding the gully existing between us. Soon my name got modified to a *social leech*. I know what most of you think about people like me. You accuse of enriching ourselves at the expense of the wellbeing of the community we were born to serve. But you see, Zacheus, it is like the story my grandfather use to tell me about the devil's gala. He described it as a dance of the devils in which every invited living human, once they get into that circle, can't get away the same as when they got in. While in the middle of the circle there is no retreat, no surrender. It does no good to claim your feet are too delicate to dance to the tune of that ghostly vibrant drumming. You can never withdraw in one piece. You have only two options: either you lose your feet in an attempt to escape or dance yourself to death. I refused losing my feet so here I am dancing away my life!'

While he said these words Zacheus thought of how firmly he too had been caught in the spell of that dance of the devil. He remembered all those days when he had to chauffeur Muto and her girl-friends to and from Strikers, a cheap brothel in Limbe. He had known long ago that Muto had strange sexual tendencies but he kept this to himself, telling himself it was none of his business. He had his job to protect. And of course, there were the fat tips Muto gave him every

now and then to seal his lips. He too, in several ways, had subjected himself to a perpetual bond of slavery. What would happen to his integrity if Muto decided to sell him out? Was it Muto's revelation that he should be concerned about or the historic hold-up he had carried out on the highway?

'What shall we do now?' Zacheus asked, trying to shake off the feeling of guilt. 'She said the police are looking for you.' It suddenly occurred to Zacheus that he might be the one the police were looking for. Ma Joki might have got the wrong impression. She, like the mayor, didn't know Zacheus might be a wanted man. Maybe he should tell the mayor what he had done. But the moment was terribly wrong with the mayor in such a depressed mood.

'It is all over, Zacheus,' Lobe said and smiled. 'I won't fight back. There is nothing left to fight for. I can't live in hiding. Maybe I will find some peace wherever they will take me to. Take me to my house. I have nothing more to lose.'

Zacheus nodded, swallowed nervously and started the car. Deep within him, he knew he would be arrested as soon as he stopped the car on the driveway in front of the mayor's home.

*

I remember what my twelve-year old niece Bertha, Charlotte's eldest daughter, told us happened when she was taking her Government Common Entrance and First School Leaving Certificate examinations. Our church, the one we attended as children, invited us to a harvest thanksgiving ceremony. Bertha who lived with our parents too until she graduated from primary school was to read the Sunday readings with one of her classmates. Bertha did her part well especially the responsorial psalm that wasn't in pidgin but her companion who took the second reading fumbled and

stumbled all the way to the alleluia verse. Back at our parents' home for a late lunch that afternoon, Charlotte wondered aloud how Bertha's friend ever found herself in secondary school when she was unable to read the alleluia verse.

'Mass deterioration,' my father had said with his mouth full with yam and vegetable. 'Children here are not taught a anything. Barely thirty minutes after leaving home for school, you see them along the road with buckets to fetch water for teachers and machetes and hoes to work in the teachers' farms. Farming and housekeeping is all they are taught these days because the teachers benefit. They have no time to learn anything else. Manual labour is all they are subjected to.'

'Just like when Rosa was in school here too,' my mother reminded him. 'They carried planks on their heads from Makonde to Njiba. They had to take brooms bigger than their heads to school before they could pass in handwork. But they still made it to college and defended their status as college girls more than that girl did today.'

'It is because they had a mother who found time to teach them back at home,' my father said. 'But that is not the case with the rest. With the mad search for money nowadays not many children are lucky to have slow-going parents who take time out of the mad rush to have a look at what the children do all day. Very few parents try to determine what else their children might need apart from cakes and dresses and toys to enable them grow properly.'

'Yes, Papa philosopher,' Charlotte had cried out in mock protestation. 'We didn't ask for a sermon.'

'It is no sermon,' father said quickly. 'I am only trying to let you know that like children you have to count yourselves blessed. Others were not and are not that privileged. With this in mind, you will know how to handle your own offspring if you expect any good out of them tomorrow.'

'Thank you Papa,' Charlotte said with a bow.

'How then do they pass their exams if nobody teaches them, children like that girl for instance?' I asked.

'Ask Bertha how they do it,' my mother said.

When I asked Bertha, she told us what happened during the two days they wrote their final examinations. Shortly after the question paper was served to the pupils, the invigilator walked out of the examination room to the corridor where he met a head-teacher whose pupils were writing in the room. They shook hands and something changed hands from the head-teacher to the invigilator – money undoubtedly. The invigilator continued down the corridor while the head-teacher came over to the window and slipped a piece of paper containing answers to the examination questions to one of the pupils, instructing him in a whisper to copy the answers quickly into his question papers and pass the piece of paper on to the other pupils.

'That way the school scores a hundred percent, the head-teacher gets congratulated and promoted, while the pupils are sent off into the world in blindness to grub around for survival,' my father had said.

I recall that Aza's boys once captured a similar scene which was broadcasted in *Matanda* and led to the cancellation of the entire examination in one centre in Edea. The examination officials were all dismissed and the pupils involved suspended for three years.

Those were the unfortunate lot. What about the rest who go unnoticed? Unfortunately I don't have answers to questions resolving all forms of irregular behaviour. I can only do what I can. We all have our limits. And at this moment, I feel really stretched out after listening to stories for close to three hours. My family will be here soon. I have to round up and be on my way.

'I have heard your stories,' I say calmly, choosing my words. 'I have a proposal to make.' I look straight at Sadi who is watching me suspiciously. His eyes seem to be reminding me that there isn't any worse pain I can inflict on him at the moment. And he is right. He had had more than his fair share of unpleasant torments since Tuesday, suffering unduly

because of his presence in the way of lava from the erupting mountain of selfishness.

'Are you aware that I signed a prefectoral order on Thursday postponing the NMORA elections to next week?' I ask Sadi.

'Madam, police sails are not equipped with radios or newspapers. How could I have heard?' he asks scornfully. 'I don't know and I don't want to know.'

'I have told you now,' I tell him coldly. 'You see, Mr. Sadi, I don't know much about you. But it is not too difficult to determine how you think. See, I don't care whether you like me or not. You are not supposed to, anyway. But I want you to know that I have a duty to perform and I cannot perform it alone. I wasn't there when you took your two legs and eyes to register and campaign to become the president of the driver's syndicate. I don't think anybody forced you into it. As at this moment, I don't think you have submitted a resignation letter. Now listen! You will have to see that these elections come to pass hitch-free. You may have your personal reasons for shying away from what is happening around you and I too have my own collective reasons for asking that you organize these elections in an orderly and peaceful manner. I will personally be present on that day.'

He is still staring at me as if I have gone insane.

'I will do what I can to assist you with your insurers,' I add.

He shakes his head quickly and raises his hand.

'Madam, thank you,' he says, getting to his feet. 'I don't have the time and energy to run after insurance company. I don't think it is necessary – I mean all what you are proposing – '

'Sit down. I am not yet through. Still regarding the elections, I choose you for a reason. Mbodi and a few other young men came to my office on Thursday morning to lay some complaints. From what I gathered . . . anyway you are going to handle it. I won't risk any kind of manifestation in

my area of jurisdiction because of what you want or don't want to do. I don't think you want me too on your skin at a time like this.'

'Madam – '

'Shhh. Now listen, I know you have suffered unjustly. But that is life. We all have to move on. You will have sufficient time to lick your wounds. Nobody is ready to give you a lifetime to adjust to this reality. You will report in my office on Monday morning then we can talk again. Now, concerning you Mr. Esingi – '

My phone is ringing. It is my husband.

'Excuse me,' I say and walk out to the corridor to answer the call.

'Where are you?' he ask me. What a tingling sweet sensation his hoarse voice triggered down in my belly.

'At the office, rounding up things,' I say. 'Have you been in for long?'

'Just coming. I heard it on TV and stopped at the hospital to see Aza.'

'Oh! How is he?'

'Well, he looks frail but he will survive. He said I should tell you he handed a package. Anyway, we shall talk about that later. When are you coming? Bitu is treating me as if I locked you in a closet and dropped the key in a pit toilet . . . erase the toilet part and paste *sea*. Thank God I thought of bringing my keys. At what time did you say . . .'

What a talking machine! Never seen a noisier medical doctor.

'I will be through in a moment, Dear,' I say. 'Got a big command for lizard skin.' It is my coded way of telling him Yaoundé is on my throat.

'Anything serious? You sound worried, tired . . .' my husband ask with concern.

'I will be on my way shortly then we can talk about it, Dear.'

'As you say.' He sounds resigned. 'Waiting. Ten minutes max.'

Twenty five.'

'Fifteen!' he cries out.

'Okay, twenty,' I say.

'Twenty then. Bitu –' he goes on but I don't let him continue.

I get back to the room and notice that Sirri, Zacheus and Sadi have been having a warm talk. 'He allowed them take you away?' I hear Sadi asking and it occurs to me that I almost forgot asking Zacheus how he ended up in sail.

'Yes, I too have been wondering,' I say.

They immediately fall into silence as I take my seat.

'Did they arrest you in the presence of the mayor?' I ask.

Zacheus nods.

'I drive the mayor to his house,' Zacheus explains. 'They wait for us there. As I park the car one of the police call patron for corner and they talk and talk for a long time. Then patron went inside and the policeman tell me I have to go to station with them.'

'Which means his mother-in-law got it all wrong?' I ask. 'They have been looking for you all along.'

Zacheus nods.

'Patron gets connection,' Zacheus says and smiles, 'No man fit lock him. No man. He is a strong man.'

I don't want to tell him there is nobody who wrists are too big for the cuffs to go round. It all depends on time. And Lobe's time is already too close at hand.

'And he let them take you!' It is Sirri who ask with disgust.

'He was angry and leave me because I did not tell him what happen. But Madam come out shortly and told me not to worry. She will talk to patron to come move me out if they lock me.'

'But he didn't come to get you out until I did.'

'No Madam, before you send the letter . . . I mean the order, I was wearing my trouser already. Patron call commissioner to leave me on house and street arrest.'

Sadi and Sirri smiled simultaneously at this.

'House and street arrest!' I ask. I have never heard of this.

Zacheus nods and smiles.

'Free to be in the street and in the house but not in sail,' Zacheus explained intelligently. 'That is how patron bails people. Can even fly abroad if I get passport and nobody stop me.'

This is quite a town! I tell myself. It will require a fist the size of one of those boulders on the foot of Mount Fako to change the course of things.

'Yes, as I was saying before my phone rang –' What was I saying? 'The video, Mr. Sadi, I will need it.'

Sadi grunts. I ignore him and turn to Zacheus.

'Mr. Esingi, you will agree with me that your case deserves the hand of justice. Under normal circumstances you should be in sail.'

Zacheus nods. I can see the hint of a smile of defiance on his face. He might be thinking of his house and street arrest condition negotiated by his boss.

'You know that what you did can land you in Buea and keep you there for years irrespective of who might want to intervene, don't you?'

He seems to understand my point. The smile vanishes and then a weak nod. Yet I can still see some traces of doubt on his twisted forehead.

'Good. Mr. Sadi wherever you are keeping that camera, keep it safely. We shall need it shortly. I will need to talk to Aza again when he gets better. Mr. Esingi, you can go home.'

Zacheus stares at me wide-eyed as I get up from my chair.

'Mr. Sadi, do not forget our appointment. Monday, nine o'clock,' I stand up and stare pointedly at Sirri. 'As your friend suggested, I think you have an obligation to take this

lady for a break. Your father is a good man. Mbenga will be delighted to have you two for a weekend.'

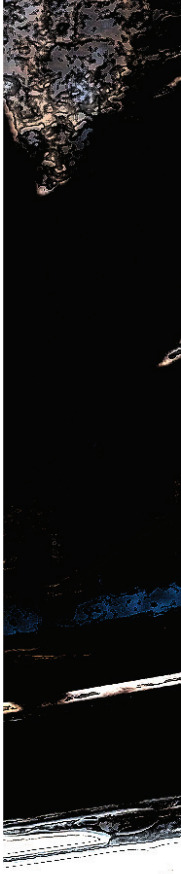
'Thank you Madam, for everything' Sirri says and smiles wearily.

I am not quite sure I have done anything yet. I nod anyway.

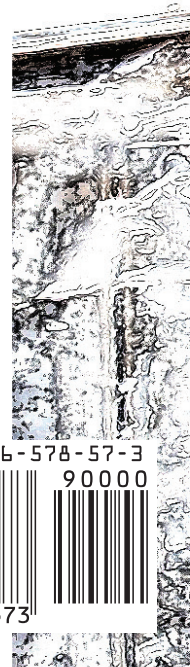
Sadi is already at the door, his hands insight his trousers pocket.

THE END

Rosi-Daniela Kouoh, a female Divisional Officer newly appointed to Njopongo, steps into office at a time when preparations for elections in the Riders Union sows panic in the hearts of the town's barons and a tragic road accident ignites feelings of vengeance and survival. In order to determine the root-cause of the rising tension and build a platform for lasting calm and justice, she gets two men out of police custody; Sadi, a loser and bitter father of an unborn child, and Esingi, a daring, retired streetboy and chauffeur to the powerful Lord Mayor and business tycoon. This is the thrilling tale of a woman determined to purge her town of injustice, corruption and greed. It is also the story of the niece of the Lord Mayor torn between family loyalty and her love for a poor bus driver.



Dipita Kwa was born in Tiko, South West Region, Cameroon. He was a teacher of Commerce and Finance, Economics and Economic Geography at Regina Pacis College Mutengene. His first novel *Times and Seasons* was published by Cook Communication. He co-authored *One World*, a global anthology of short stories alongside Chimamande Ngozi Adichie, Petina Gappah, etc. His short stories have also appeared in e-magazines: *Authorme*, British Council Crossing Borders Magazine (Radiophonics), *KenAgain*.



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